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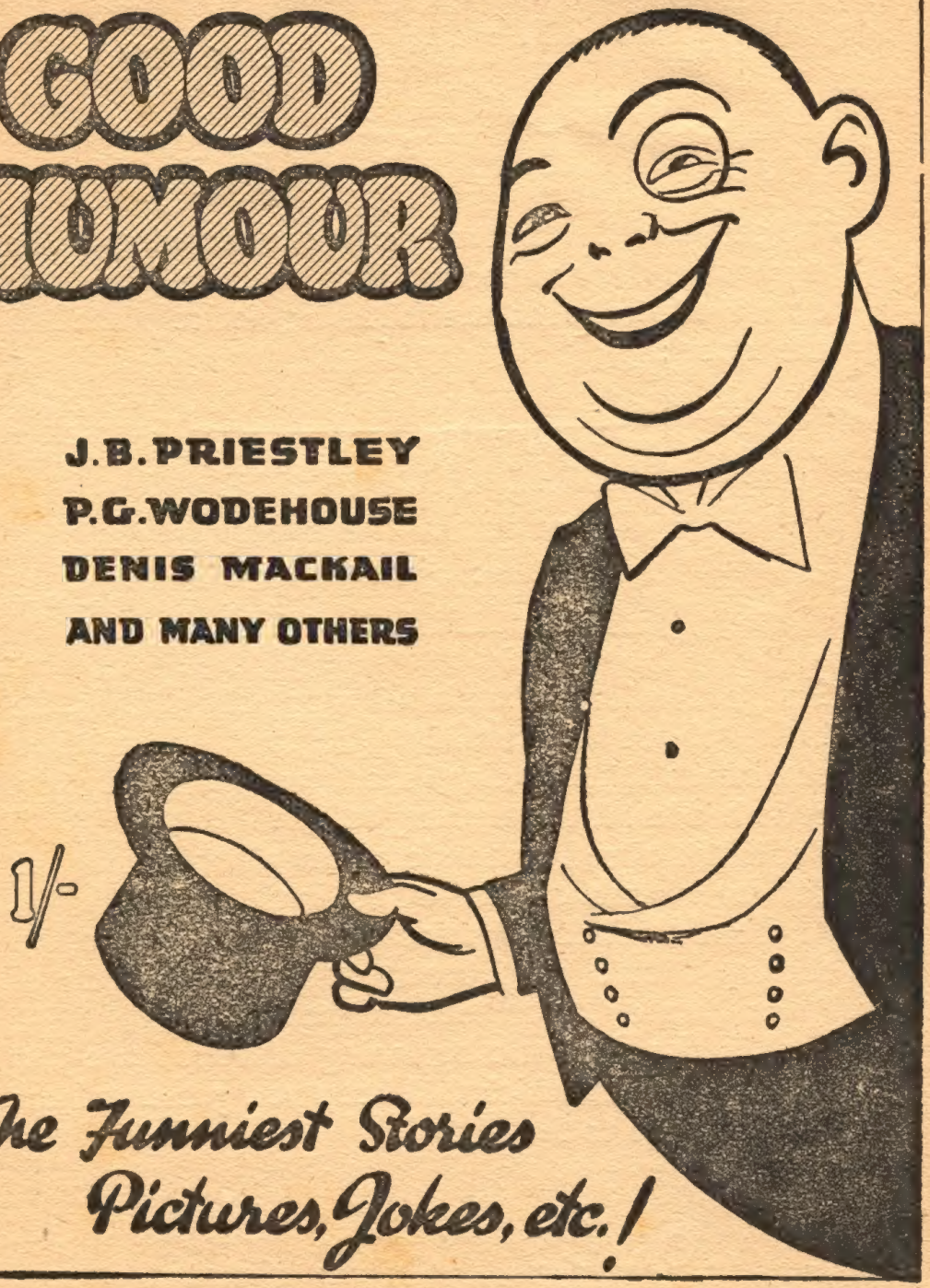

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WEST is published every other Friday, price one shilling, by the World's Work (1913) Ltd., The Windmill Press, Kingswood, Surrey. Subscription rate 26s. a year, 13s. for six months. South Africa, 29s. a year. Any questions regarding advertising should be addressed to the Advertising Manager, 99, Great Russell Street, London, W.C.1.

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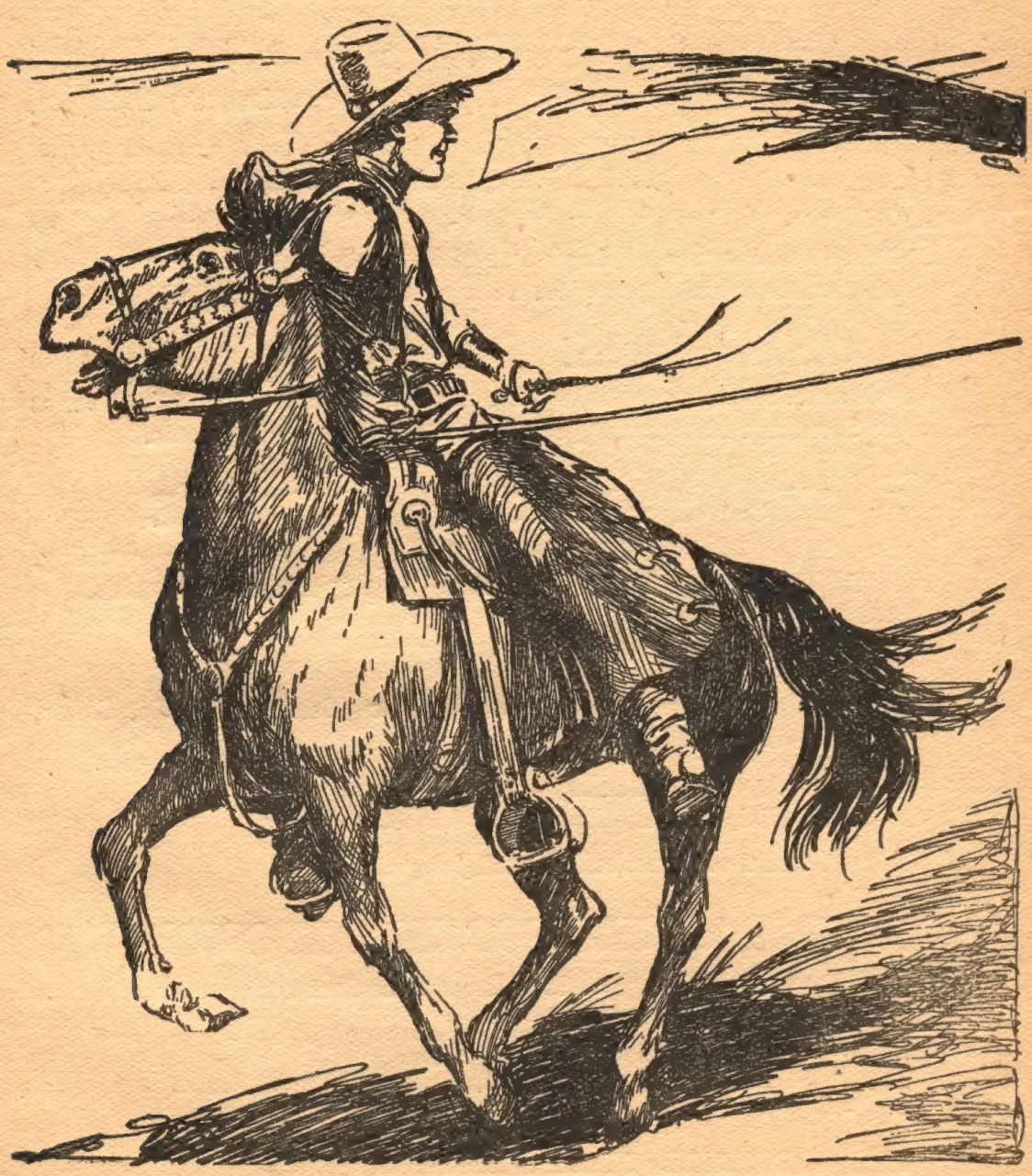
TIE-FAST HOMBRE

COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By

CHARLES M. MARTIN

There Was An Unwritten Law In That Country For Both Cowhand And Lumberjack—Then Came The Tie-Fast Hombre



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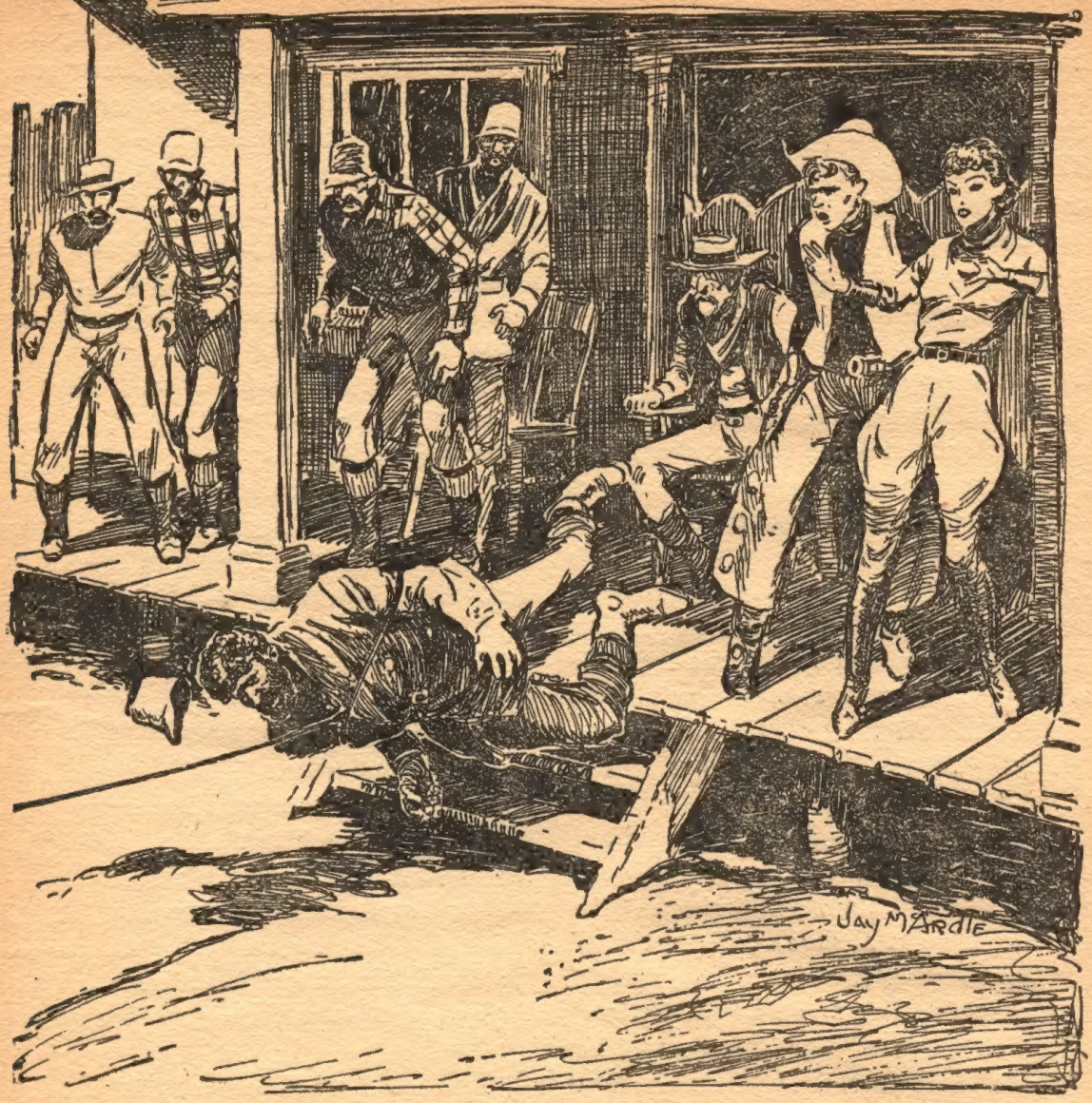


Tie-Fast jerked him down from the porch.

Sitting easy on a deep-chested bay, Tie-Fast Condon rode into High Rock with the rising sun. Night hawks and early risers looked him over curiously, but the young Texan was occupied with the wonders of the high country.

Northern California was some different from the Panhandle, and Tie-Fast was staring at the Seven Sisters mountains, and the heavy growth of timber that covered the towering slopes. Cattle chutes and lumber-loading platforms shouldered the railroad-spur side by side, just as cowboys and lumbermen shouldered each other on the rough board walks of the one street.

The Texan reined in at the tie-rail in front of the Black Jack saloon. Before he could swing down, a girl pushed through the doors of the General Store that shouldered up to the emporium of thirst. Half twisted for a dismount, the cowboy eased his right leg in the oxbow and held his seat while he stared at the girl.

Wool shirt open at the neck to swell away from a rounded figure just budding to full womanhood. Rough wool riding breeches in high laced boots, but it was the girl's face that held the Texan's interest. Brown eyes alight with eager interest; high cheek bones sloping to a determined chin.

The swinging batwings flapped open in the Black Jack saloon. A wide-shouldered ape of a man barged through with red hair licking out from a hole in his flat hat. His calked boots dug grooves in the dirt as he skidded to a stop in front of the girl, and Tie-Fast Condon reached for the tight-twist rope near his right hand.

"Gives you mornin', Martha gal," the lumber jack shouted loudly. "I'll jest ride back to camp with you!"

The girl turned sideways to avoid contact. "You can ride out with the freighter," she answered quietly."I prefer to be alone."

The lumber jack hunched his tremendous shoulders and leered drunkenly. Then his right hand shot out suddenly and fastened on the girl's shoulder. Tie-Fast Condon flipped his loop and kicked the bay into a jump. Two jumps before he neck-reined the bay to hold the rope taut.

"Oh! That's Bear Trap Lee you've roped!"

The young Texan grinned at the girl and raised his Stetson. "Glad to know his name," he drawled in a soft baritone. "I'm Tie-Fast Condon at yore service, ma'am!"

"Tie me loose, you blasted cow nurse!"

The lumber jack surged to his feet and tugged on the rope. The Texan gigged his horse to the side and tightened the rope with a jerk. Bear Trap sat down suddenly, and the cowboy was out of the saddle, coming hand over hand down the tight rope. His hands made two quick passes when he reached the lumber jack; two turns and a half-hitch with the piggin' string to bind the kicking ankles.

"You go on the peck, I aim to hawg-tie you like a yearlin'," he warned softly. "There's a lady present that don't like yore language none."

"Just a minute, stranger. I sent Bear Trap in to bring Martha to camp. I'll thank you to cast off those ropes."

The cowboy turned slowly with hand shadowing the old Colt .45 on his right leg. His blue eyes traveled from laced boots to stiff-brimmed Stetson. Came to rest on the smooth face of a man he figured to be about thirty. Swept on to the girl with a questioning glance.

"What do you say, Miss Martha?" he asked softly.

"Mister Condon, this is my cousin, Oak Farley. Mr. Farley is manager of the lumber company. I guess maybe you better turn Bear Trap loose."

The Texan nodded his head. "Howdy, Farley," he grunted. "This hombre was annoying the lady."

He leaned over and flipped his hand. Bear Trap doubled his legs; came to his feet when the cowboy flipped the rope from his arms. Charged forward with a bellow of rage when he found himself free.

"I'll kill you," he growled deep in his throat. "I'll mash you to a pulp!"

The cowboy stepped back and slapped his black bull-hides. Held the old gun steady while his voice purred a warning.

"Ease off and circle the herd while you can. I don't booger worth a hoot!"

Bear Trap eased off. Stopped his rush with calks biting deep while he stared into the muzzle that looked like a tunnel. Oak Farley bought in on the play with a sneering laugh.

"Texan, eh? And the name is Condon if I understand Martha correctly."

"Right both times," Tie-Fast agreed evenly. "Old Charley Condon is my uncle, and here he comes now."

He holstered his gun smoothly and turned to grip hands with a weather-cured old rawhider who carried the stamp of "cattle" all over his get-up. Tall and slender with legs warped under scarred chaps. Gray cow-horn mustaches and bright gray eyes. Faded gray Stetson that had seen the snows of a dozen winters in the high Sierras, but all man from hocks to horns. Old Charley Condon of the C Cross C cattle spread.

"I'd know you anywhere, Tie-Fast," he

rumbled. "You got yere just in time. Glad to see you, feller, but don't have no truck with them Farleys yonder who rod the lumber company. They're the ones who are giving me all my grief."

"Long time no see you, Uncle Charley," the cowboy grinned. "What you got yore hackles all up about?"

"She's water, son," the old cattleman explained gruffly. "That short-horn jigger yonder is lawin' me over my water rights. Wants to build him a dam to float his timber to market, an' I says no. Says it loud and frequent, and what I mean is NO!"

"I'll get that water, too," Oak Farley boasted with a sneer. "I've got riparian rights up here in this country like you are due to find out. That goes for you too, Texan!"

"Is that yore ever' day business, or are you meanin' it personal," Tie-Fast asked quietly. "Speak her big, feller. Down my way, when a feller cuts a rusty, he cuts her big."

The girl interrupted quickly. "I'm thanking you for what you did for me, Mister Condon," she said stiffly, and tugged at Oak Farley's arm. " We better be going, Oak."

Oak Farley was six feet tall and built accordingly. No fat. Tall and muscular like the trees his men cut to earth. And as hard.

"You give it a name," he smiled lazily. "But the Farley Lumber Company is going to have the water it needs for its business. You are new here, Condon. Better hold your axe till you know just what the giraffe seen when he looked over the trees."

The cowboy rubbed his chin. "Axes ain't in my line," he answered gravely. "But the name is 'Tie-Fast', Farley. When I dab my twine on a critter, I stay with him till one of us busts the rope. You won't be no different!"

"I'll play out my string," Farley answered. "Let's go, Martha."

Tie-Fast watched them climb into a buckboard and whirl away behind a pair of spirited blacks. His face was still puzzled when he turned back to his uncle. Charley Condon grinned and slapped the younger man on the shoulder.

"That's tellin' 'em off, Tie-Fast," he approved. "I can see you ain't a one to be turned by a purty face. Not that Marthy ain't a likely filly, but that cousin of hers is pizen in large doses. When you get in?"

"Last night," the cowboy answered. "Shipped old Booger up and packed my gear in a sack. Camped out last night to get the smell of cinders out of my lungs. I no more than rode into High Rock when you come spurrin' up."

"Needed yore help," the old cattleman answered seriously. "Needed a Texan to side me down the river. You seen th' river, didn't you?"

"Seen her and took a bath in her," the cowboy answered.

"Tallied off several hundred head of C Cross C critters before I got tired counting. You got a nice layout here, Charley."

"Purtiest spread in th' county," the old cattleman agreed proudly. "But that big jigger you told off is trying to steal our water."

"Your water," the cowboy corrected. "I'm just a hand on the C Cross C."

"Ourn," the cattleman insisted. "Yo're my only kin, Tie-Fast. The spread is yores when I shuffle off this mortal coil. That's why I brung you up yere from Texas."

"There's lots of water up here in these mountains," the cowboy argued, but his blue eyes showed that he was trying to change the subject. "That's a sizable river down below."

"Shore is," the cattleman agreed. "And I aim to keep her that way. Oak Farley now; he's trying to cut her down on the other side of the range."

Tie-Fast was not listening. His eyes followed the girl who was driving the black team; wandered to the square shoulders of

Oak Farley seated by her side in the buckboard.

"Cousins," he smiled musingly. "She looks like cattle folks to me, but that Oak feller is something else again. And likewise that Bear Trap gent."

Charley Condon sighed and tapped the cowboy on the arm. His rocky features were as harsh as his eyes when he stared at the Farleys and drove home his points with a forefinger that hammered on the cowboy's muscle.

"It's war, Tie-Fast," he stated bluntly. "And you started it when you dabbed yore twine on that baboon who answers to the name of Bear Trap Lee. He's the kingpin bully of the Farley Lumber Company camp where ever' man is a proven fighter. Me and Oak has been edgin' at each other about this water business, but so far we ain't actually tied in for a showdown."

"Down Texas way we look after the wimmin folks like you know," the cowboy answered slowly. "That lobo was putting his dirty hands on the gal without her sayso."

"And you throwed down on him with yore cutter," the cattleman pointed out. "That was what declared war."

The cowboy shrugged carelessly; turned away from the dust cloud that hid the disappearing buckboard. His hands mechanically coiled his rope, and he shrugged when he saw three cowboys ride into town from the other end of the street. All straddled mountain horses burned with the C Cross C.

"Let 'er buck," he muttered. "How many hands we carry on the spread?"

"Twelve, and every man a tophand. Oak Farley has forty men in his lumber camp."

Tie-Fast grinned. "That makes us about even," he chuckled. "But why does Oak Farley want our water?"

"Log jams," Condon answered briefly. "He floats his timber down here to High Rock, and if he had the water that was running down through the Seven Sisters, he could quit using that dinky locomotive. He could float his cut down without loading and unloading."

Again the cowboy was showing little interest in the Farley Lumber Company. His keen eyes were gauging the three cowboys tying up in front of the saloon. Bear Trap was also watching them with hatred smoldering in his dark eyes.

"Cow nurses," the lumber jack sneered. "And I never did like none of th' breed."

The three cowboys were all tall and lanky. They stopped like one man and faced Bear Trap Lee who blocked the doors of the saloon. Then they edged back to their horses. Tie-Fast hooked his horse and covered the distance in three jumps; stopped the big animal with sliding feet to throw gravel all over the lumber jack.

"Have one on me," he invited the three cowboys. "Step aside, you ring-tailed spavin!"

"The Black Jack is for lumbermen," Bear Trap growled, and spread his legs.

Tie-Fast still held the rope in his hand. The loop flicked out like a snake and slapped the bully on the left boot. Bear Trap leaped nimbly; crashed to his shoulders when the loop caught his ankle just as the big bay settled back. The cowboy anchored his rope to the slick horn and walked his horse away with Bear Trap Lee dragging like a calf going to the fire.

Old Charley Condon grinned and rubbed his grizzled chin. The three C Cross C men stared their unbelief. Bear Trap came to his feet bellowing like a bull that has been whipped out of the herd, and Tie-Fast gigged his horse one jump to spill his catch. After which the cowboy flipped his rope loose and stared at the bully while he took his coils.

"I'll get you, by Gawd! I'll break ever' bone in yore dam body!"

The cowboy drew his throwing arm back; faced the shouting lumberjack with his cold blue eyes. His voice was brittle when he

kneed the bay forward to crowd the heavy-shouldered fighter.

"Get goin', hombre," he warned. "You ever lay a hand on me, I'll dab a loop on yore carcass and drag you to death."

Bear Trap Lee backed away from the threatening loop. His little eyes glared madly while his big hands clenched into ham-like fists, and twice he bit his lips when the loop snapped out toward him. Then the calks in his boots bit deep when he whirled around the corner of the general store and disappeared. Tie-Fast turned back to the three cowboys.

"I'm still buying," he said slowly. "Tie-Fast Condon is the name, fellers. New ramrod of the C Cross C. Let's belly up to the bar, after which we'll ride back to the spread. There's something wrong when a cowboy steps aside for the likes of that lumberjack."

HIGH COUNTRY LAW

Old Charley Condon followed the four cowboys into the Black Jack. Put a gnarled hand on the shoulder of his nephew, and his gray eyes twinkled when he made the introductions.

"Like Tie-Fast says, he's the new ramrod. Tie-Fast, the jigger on yore right is Idaho Cawley. He rides th' rough string on the C Cross C, and rides it tophand. These other two is Curly Peters and Hank Tuttle. Mebbe so you can make men out of them."

The three cowboys nodded; turned their eyes away from the Young Texan whose blue eyes seemed to smile mockingly. The buckaroo spoke first in half-shamed tones.

"That Bear Trap Lee; he's sudden death if he gets those arms of his around you, Tie-Fast. We seen him cripple up three-four men so they never was any good no more."

Tie-Fast looked squarely at Idaho Cawley's flushed face. Allowed his eyes to drop down to the gun on the long right leg; back again to stare at the tall buckaroo with an answer in his eyes.

"Yeah; I got a gun," Idaho admitted slowly. "But we got a queer law up here in these mountains, boss."

"You must have," the Texan agreed. "When a gent lets a jigger like Bear Trap Lee break his back while he's packin' a little law of his own on his leg. Spell her out, feller."

"We ain't got no sheriff in this county," old Charley explained. "Never did have one. We got two constables, and both of them fellers works at their own business besides. Up here she's cattle and lumber, Tie-Fast."

"No sheriff?" The Texan looked puzzled. "And two constables what work at cattle and lumber. It don't make sense to me, Charley."

"There's Corb Jason what runs the C bar J," Condon explained patiently. "Corb ain't afraid of man or beast, and while he don't shoot so awful fast, he shoots where he's aiming at. Then there's Timber Cronk what keeps order in the lumber camp, and what I mean, he keeps order. He can whip any jack on the Farley payroll with the exception of Bear Trap Lee. Them two is the law hereabouts."

"Yeah," Tie-Fast answered lazily. "I saw the jail right next door to the general store. Jails is alright for drunks, but me, I don't get drunk. So I don't have any personal interest in that jail."

"We got a kind of unwritten law here in High Rock," old Charley said slowly. "If a gent gets in trouble with another gent, either Corb Jason or Timber Cronk sets out to bring him in. If the feller beats the posse to the jail, he's bound to be acquitted. Keep that in mind, Tie-Fast."

Idaho Cawley stiffened when the batwings swung open. "Here comes Timber Cronk now," he whispered. "Talk easy, Tie-Fast."

Timber Cronk paused inside the doors and swept the room with black eyes that stared straight from under shaggy gray brows. That direct uncompromising stare

of the peace officer who carries the authority of the law among hard men.

Cronk was big; six feet of lean muscle. Square shoulders that tapered down to a lean middle and bulged out again in the iron thews of his legs. Cronk was hard and looked it, but there was a certain rugged honesty in his wide eyes, and determination in the set of his jutting jaw. Tin pants stagged off to show high-laced boots riding high on sharpened calks. His was the costume of typical lumber jack. Rock-like hands that reminded one of oak mauls.

He saw the cattlemen and came forward like a cat in spite of his two hundred pounds. Hands on hips with fingers closed while he stared at Tie-Fast Condon. Short-barreled forty-four Colt belted high under his open Mackinaw.

"You Tie-Fast Condon?" he asked, and his voice was the booming thunder of wind in the timber.

"Present," the cowboy answered dryly. "Yo're Timber Cronk; constable for the lumber company."

"Constable of High Rock county," the officer corrected bluntly. "The law speaking, Texan. This time I'm serving warning. You threatened a man with firearms this morning; yore first day in town. Don't do it no more. Only reason I'm letting you off is because Bear Trap was drunk, and annoying a lady."

"I takes that kindly," the cowboy murmured. "He was on the peck, Timber. Looking for trouble, and down Texas way we don't eat crow for a jigger what lays hands on our women folks."

"Martha Farley ain't none of yore wimmin folks, and this ain't Texas," Cronk answered in his booming voice. "I'll take care of that jack if he gets salty, and we don't allow no man to pack hardware in town Saturday."

Tie-Fast faced the constable squarely. "Yo're timber folks the way I sees it," he answered slowly. "You know these lumber jacks and I don't. I've heard they fight with their feet, and all of 'em wear corks on their boots."

"They got to wear corks," the constable boomed. "My advice to you is to stay out of town on Saturday night. You can't come up here in the country looking for trouble while I'm half of the law!"

"Law or no law, you can't cut a rusty on me," the Texan drawled slowly. "I go where I want to, and up to now I've always took care of myself without no help. Mebbe you better pass that to the man-stompin' lumber jacks up at Farley's camp. Special to that bone-breaking jigger you call Bear Trap."

Timber Cronk stared at the cowboy while his square jaw jutted out like a shoulder of granite. "You go bucking me and I'll lower the boom on you," he growled, and his black eyes flashed a warning.

Old Charley Condon stepped between the two. "Timber Cronk is a square shooter, Tie-Fast," he interrupted quickly. "He's got a hard job like you will see when you watch him work some Sattiday night. And looky, Timber. Tie-Fast is the son of my only brother who died when Tie-Fast was a yearlin'. He's a square shooter, too, and I'd like for you fellers to get along."

"Sorry, Timber," the cowboy said quickly, and stepped forward with his right hand stretched out. "I won't make you no trouble unless I'm pushed into it. There's my hand on it, an' I'd admire to touch flesh with you!"

He winced when the lumberman swept his huge hand over and gripped him hard. Here was a man who would never back down an inch; one who would carry the law against any odds that came up the mountain. Tie-Fast Condon could feel all these things in the tingle of repressed strength that vibrated from the grip of Timber Cronk's hand.

"It's a promise, Texan," the constable rumbled. "I'll see you get a square deal no matter who it hurts. That goes for

Corb Jason who packs the other half of the law. Corb is stubborn as a mule, but he shoots 'em square. Sometimes him and me gets along for as much as half a day."

"Row outside," Idaho Cawley interrupted. "Speaking of the devil!"

They poured through the batwings into the bright morning sun. Bear Trap was braced on his thick legs facing a tall lean man who talked through drooping cowhorn mustaches. Thorn-scarred chaps covered the tall man's legs, and a droopy black Stetson shaded faded blue eyes that stared hard at the truculent lumber jack. His voice was low and drawling when he talked, and his right hand was hooked over the peacemaker tied low on his right leg. Cow-country from high hat to high heels.

"You climb that freight wagon and high-tail it back to camp," he was telling the bully. "I catch you in town when th' clock strikes twelve, I'm slapping you in the calabooze. You savvy?"

"He throwed down on me with a gun," the lumber jack snarled nastily. "This is only Thursday, but I'll get that Texan come Saturday night shore as hell. They can't pack no guns then accordin' to town law."

Timber Cronk slithered forward like a panther. His right hand shot out to whirl Bear Trap Lee off balance, and his left jolted out like a driving rod. Bear Trap grunted and hunched his shoulders. Timber Cronk leaped high in the air and turned like a cat. His right foot caught the bully squarely in the middle and slapped him to earth. The constable lighted on his feet in a crouch.

"Get up," he boomed. "It's the jug for yore kind!"

He was jerked back when Corb Jason spun him into a circle. "My prisoner," Jason barked. "You ride the outside circle this time, Timber Cronk!"

His old gun leaped to his hand and disappeared in the belly of Bear Trap Lee. His left hand jerked the bully to his feet; propelled him rapidly down the street to the jail. Marched him inside to a cell and slammed the door with a grating jar.

"Disturbing th' peace of High Rock," he drawled, and turned to face Timber Cronk who was glaring at him with fists knotted into mauls.

"You'll do that just one time too many, Corb," the timberman growled deep in his corded throat. "I'll take care of my own kind."

"Not when I beat you to the take-off," and Corb Jason crouched over his gun. "You tried to run a windy that time, Timber."

"You was aiming to shoot him," Cronk growled. "You cattlemen go off half-cocked most of the time noway."

"Us cattlemen do purty well," Jason crowed, and then he holstered his gun. "Sorry if I got yore hackles up," he drawled. "But you cut into my play without no bid, Timber."

Timber Cronk grinned slowly and scratched his graying head. "Reckon I did at that, Corb," he admitted honestly. "Only thing is that I got in the habit of acting quick with these square-heads that handle timber. Like you said, I cruised into yore timber without a bid. What you holding that jack for?"

"Ain't holding him, Timber," and Corb Jason smiled humorously. "Just slapping him in the gow till he gets sober. Jake with you?"

"Aces," Cronk answered promptly. "We'll send him back to camp with the mail at sun-down. Did you meet up with Tie-Fast Condon? Nephew to ole Charley, and the new ramrod of the C Cross C."

"Howdy, Tie-Fast," and Corb Jason reached out his right hand. "Knew you was Texan from that double rig on yore kak, and that tie-fast rope hanging on the horn. Up yere we takes our dallies."

"T'meetcha," and Tie-Fast shook hands soberly. "*Dally vuelta* is a foreign tongue to me, and I always ties fast to anything

I dabs my twine onto. Purty country you got up this away."

"Now looky," Jason argued soberly. "When you snares a critter in timber, you got to be ready to cut loose yore dallies if he circles a tree. Some of them steers run as high as twelve hundred pounds. Where would you be tied fast to a booger like that if he cuts a dime around one of them Douglas firs?"

"Right in the saddle," and the Texan tightened his lips. "I'd either hold him or bust him, and we use a tight-twist rope down in Texas."

"See you Sattiday night," a thick voice interrupted. "Lumber agin cattle, you four-flushin' cow-nurse!"

Tie-Fast Condon straightened up slowly while the smile left his face. Now his blue eyes were hard and bright when he stared into the beefy face of Bear Trap Lee. Corb Jason and Timber Cronk looked at each other and took deep breaths. Waited for the cowboy to speak.

"It's a date," the Texan drawled slowly, and the corners of his mouth twitched upward with repressed anticipation. "In the Black Jack when the clock strikes ten!"

"It's uh date," Corb Jason said to Timber Cronk solemnly. "In the Black Jack Sattiday night at ten!"

"Won't need no whistle punk to blow the time," the latter answered in his deep voice. "Leave yore hardware to home, Texan!"

"I never travel nekked," and Tie-Fast's voice was emphatic. "I always dresses like a man!"

"You stay out on the spread come Sattiday," and old Charley Condon gripped his kinsman by the right arm. "With trouble riding smack up to meet us," he added soberly.

"I'm siding you, boss," and Idaho Cawley stepped forward to place himself on the new ramrod's right.

"I'll take the same," and Hank Peters lined up on the left to glare at Timber.

"Happy days," old Charley whispered. "Better tie up yore wolf, Timber."

"Tie hell with a slip knot," and Timber Cronk grunted. "Where you standing, Corb?"

"On the sidelines with a Colt on my leg," and Corb Jason glared at his partner in law. "I been waiting two years to see somebody curry that lobo, and for a while I thought it might be you. I'll be there, and I'll be watching Oak Farley careful!"

"That means trouble will be riding in," and Timber Cronk frowned under his heavy grizzled brows. "You and me is th' law up here, Corb!"

Corb Jason glanced through the bars at the heavy body of the camp bully. "Yeah," he agreed tonelessly. "And Oak Farley trying to cut a rusty to run out cattle. You like that feller, Timber?"

"He was man enough to be camp boss before he was made manager," and Timber Cronk stuck out his square jaw. "Men is men, Corb, but cattle and timber don't mix none too well. Me; I like Oak Farley!"

"Jake," and Corb Jason nodded his head with quiet satisfaction. "You cut this lobo loose when the mail comes in, and I'll be seeing you come Sattiday night at ten!"

SATURDAY NIGHT

Lumberjacks stacked three deep in front of the bar at the Black Jack. Brawny sons of the woods with money in their pockets and a thirst that craved for uncut liquor spiked with pepper and cut plug. Two bits a throw with money at the graveside, because Black Jack Terry did not believe in writing his accounts on the cuff.

Black Jack was neutral. He had been both lumber jack and cowboy. A wild broomtail had broken his leg, and a giant Douglas fir had broken his left arm. But Black Jack was straight as a pine, and his gun hand had lost none of its cunning. Loved his friends and hated his enemies, and took hard cash from both.

A dozen horses racked up to the saloon and pre-empted the tie-rail. A dozen hardened riders swung down and threw slip-knots in their macartys. Shouldered the swinging doors aside and clanked into the calk-pitted bar-room with the same kind of money burning holes in their pockets. Cowboys in town on payday.

Tie-Fast Condon had old Charley rubbing spurs with him. Idaho Cawley and Hank Peters right behind them. The rest of the riding crew of the C Cross C whooping it up in the rear. Saturday night in High Rock.

Timber Cronk nudged Corb Jason where they sat at a table in the rear. Both men glanced at Bear Trap Lee who was talking to Oak Farley at the far end of the bar. Both got up and hitched their belts while they took positions along the back wall.

"I'm taking Tie-Fast to the hoosegow if he's packing a gun," Timber Cronk muttered to Corb Jason.

"I'm doing the same to Bear Trap or Oak Farley for the same reasons," Jason answered slow. "We got to uphold law here in High Rock, Timber."

"You let Oak Farley alone," Cronk growled deep in his chest. "Not forgetting that he's the walkin' boss who pays me my wages."

"The gal will pay you just the same," Jason drawled. "Keep one hand on yore iron."

Tie-Fast Condon saw the two tall peace officers take their places side by side at the end of the crowded bar. He walked slowly down the smoke-filled room with blue eyes fixed steadily on the grinning face of Bear Trap Lee. The bully pushed away from the bar and pounded with a bottle.

"Sattiday night," he shouted. "I didn't think that cow nurse would come to town, but yere he is in the flesh!"

"You promised me a killing," the Texan answered in his slow drawl. "I come on in to get it."

Timber Cronk stepped forward like a cat; stopped short when his eyes wandered down to the cowboy's right leg. Tie-Fast had left his chaps hanging on his saddle horn; his cartridge belt and six-guns hung from a peg over his bunk out on the C Cross C.

"Yo're shootin' square, cowboy," Cronk muttered. "No guns in town on pay day!"

Corb Jason stepped up to Bear Trap Lee and looked the squat bully over carefully. His big hands slapped for a hide-out, and the lumber jack smiled to show broken yellow teeth.

"I don't need nothin' but my hands to give this cooky a working over," he sneered, "for what he done to me the other day when he first hit High Rock."

"Th' law said not to carry guns in town on pay day," the cowboy said slowly. "But yo're going to need more than yore hands, you big timber wolf!"

Timber Cronk and Corb Jason stepped back to the wall. The drinkers turned to watch the expected slaughter. They had seen Bear Trap maim and cripple a score of

men; knew the tremendous strength in his powerful shoulders and arms.

The lumber jack peeled off his mackinaw and threw it on the floor. Then he leaped high in the air and cracked his heels together. Old Charley Condon walked slowly to the bar and laid a flat box on the scarred mahogany. Bear Trap wrinkled his face into a puzzled stare.

" I tie fast to anything I dab my twine on," the cowboy announced quietly, and his blue eyes bored steadily into the heavy face of his enemy. "You ever hear of a handkerchief duel?"

"We're fighting with our fists not hankies," the bully sneered. "What we waiting for?"

"Waiting for you to step up and take a white man's chance," the cowboy answered softly, and raised the lid to the flat box on the bar.

None of the lumber jacks moved as their eyes swept to the open box. Two gleaming Bowie knives rested on black velvet, their edges honed down to razor sharpness. Tie-Fast Condon picked up one of the long-bladed weapons and tested the edge with the ball of his thumb. Plucked a hair from his head and severed it with a light touch of the knife.

"A handkerchief duel sorta whittles a big gent down to the right size," he remarked conversationally. "We step up and have our left wrists tied together with the same hanky. Then each of us takes a knife in his right hand and starts to work. The winner usually cuts himself loose from a dead man. What you waiting for, Bear Trap?"

Bear Trap had paled to a sickly gray. His lips trembled while he stared at the gleaming knives. Old Charley Condon leaned back against the bar with a grin on his weathered face. Corb Jason chuckled deep in his throat. Timber Cronk growled low like a bear. Oak Farley fumbled with the edge of his open vest.

"I'm fighting with my maulies," the lumber jack almost shouted, but his voice was thick with fear. "Bear Trap, that's me, an' I'll break yore damn back like a pair of sticks!"

The cowboy reached to his neck and stripped the handkerchief from his throat. "You promised me a killing, an' you'll fight it like a man," he said clearly. "You got forty pounds on me, but old Mister Bowie figgered on giving a feller the difference when he honed hisself out a knife like them two."

"Knives are deadly weapons," and Oak Farley bought chips in a closed game. "Do your duty, Constable Cronk!"

"But he ain't packing them on his person," the constable objected uncomfortably. "I can't copper yore bet this time, Oak."

"You can arrest this Texan for disturbing the peace," and the lumberman stared hard at Timber Cronk.

"But he ain't disturbing no peace," the constable objected. "Not half as much as him an' Bear Trap would disturb it if they tied in for a free-for-all!"

"I'll break his damn neck!"

Bear Trap Lee doubled his huge fists and slid forward like a great shaggy bear. Tie-Fast Condon did not move. His right hand balanced the heavy knife with the point toward the lumber jack. His blue eyes were frosty while he held the blade for an upthrust. Bear Trap Lee stopped his rush with calks biting into the planking.

"Put down that knife," he shouted hoarsely. "I ain't got nothing but my hands!"

The Texan reached out his left hand and picked up the other knife. His fingers stiffened to flick it toward the lumberjack. The knife slid along the bar and stopped in front of Bear Trap.

"Get yoreself a handful of steel," the cowboy drawled softly. "You promised me a killing, an' I aim to do some whittling just to keep my hand in. You dog it and I aims to run you out of town."

Bear Trap Lee clenched his fists as his heavy frame began to tremble. His little black eyes began to blink, and tall Idaho Cawley laughed derisively when the lumberjack's knees began to chatter.

"Yeller," he sneered. "Yeller like a mangy kioyte!"

Bear Trap Lee edged back until he touched the door. His left hand found the knob and turned it slowly. Then he was gone into the night with a flying leap while the cowboys shouted cat-calls. Tie-Fast Condon stood at the bar with the knife in his hand, but his blue eyes were staring at Oak Farley.

Farley was glaring at him with hate in every line of his smooth face. Oak Farley was a handsome man, but now he looked like a disciple of the devil. Forty of his men against twelve cowboys, and he had been made the laughing stock of High Rock.

Timber Cronk shifted uneasily and then stepped up beside Tie-Fast. The cowboy glanced at him from the corner of one eye. Then his left hand slapped down to the constable's leg and came up filled with short-barreled threat; the constable's Colt .44.

"Arrest that man for carrying concealed weapons on payday," and he covered Oak Farley with calloused thumb dogging back the hammer.

Corb Jason stepped behind Farley and slapped with his left hand. His gun bored into the lumberman's spine while his hand lifted the snub-nosed .38 from the shoulder hide-out. When he stepped away, his face was as hard as granite.

"Got to arrest you for breaking th' law, Farley. No guns packed in High Rock on Sattiday night!"

Tie-Fast Condon lowered the hammer

"Make It Guns Or Bare Hands And I'll Take You!"

His right hand snapped inside his vest; hung poised on the draw-back when Tie-Fast Condon spoke softly.

"Pull that shoulder hide-out, and I aim to split yore heart like a pip," he warned softly. "She's against the law for anybody to carry a gun on Saturday night!"

Oak Farley slid the gun back into the shoulder holster; shook himself like a dog coming out of water.

"You and me will settle this some day, Condon," he said tensely.

"Let's settle it now," the cowboy offered easily. "Handkerchief duel. When I swing my loop, I always ties fast!"

"Make it guns or bare hands and I'll take you," Farley barked viciously. "Knives are out of my line."

"But it was you who made that law against carrying guns," old Charley Condon interrupted. "It was you what said a fight was disturbin' the peace of High Rock."

and reversed the gun in his hand. He stepped up to Timber Cronk with the weapon extended; drawled softly when Cronk glared at him.

"Begging yore pardon, Cronk. That hombre was figgerin' on a gun-sneak, and I was just taking care of myself. Thanks for yore gun."

Timber Cronk growled in his throat and took the weapon. He glared hard at the cowboy; jammed the gun deep into the lean belly and slapped for hidden weapons.

"You go too far an' I'll slap you in th' hoosegow shore as hell," he muttered. "You pull another play like that, an' I'll settle with you personal."

Tie-Fast shrugged carelessly and let his eyes wander to the knife in his hand. Then he shifted his eyes to the other knife on the bar; glanced back at the tall constable with an invitation in the jerk of his head.

"Any time you say," he drawled quietly. "But I had it straight that Timber Cronk

was a square shooter," and he glanced significantly at the hide-out gun in Corb Jason's left hand.

Timber Cronk sighed deeply and straightened his square shoulders. "Got it to do, Oak," he growled. "Yo're under arrest for packing a concealed gun, and special on Sattiday night. You coming peaceful?"

"Peaceful or otherwise, he roosts in the jug," and Corb Jason covered the lumberman and jerked his head toward the swinging doors.

Oak Farley turned an angry red and stepped back against the bar. "A swell lot of law I get here in High Rock tonight," he shouted. "You are working for the Company, Cronk!"

Timber Cronk looked uncomfortable but determined. Corb Jason took the play away to save his fellow officer a distasteful duty.

"I ain't working for the Company," he interrupted. "Yo're my prisoner, and I'm telling you the last time to line out for the jug. You can give bail down there for yore appearance, but yo're going to jail if I have to hammer you between th' horns and drag you down there!"

Timber Cronk sighed with relief when Oak Farley straightened up and started for the door with Corb Jason holding the drop. Old Charley Condon smiled gently and replaced the knives in the flat box. Hammered on the bar with his fist and shouted at the two bardogs.

"Drinks for all cowboys, and make it the best in the house. We got right good law here in High Rock, gents!"

TIMBER BEAST

Tie-Fast Condon watched the working waddies ride away from the C Cross C after giving them orders for the day. The headquarters of the cattle ranch nestled in a mountain meadow between two of the Seven Sisters mountains. Devil river brawled noisily down the gentle slopes, and the young Texan mounted his deep-chested bay and jogged up the trail toward the headwaters.

He was thinking of Oak Farley and Bear Trap Lee as he rode through the tall timber. Oak Farley had posted bond of five hundred dollars; had paid a fine of fifty dollars before the old Justice who administered the law in High Rock. Wednesday morning, and nothing had been heard of the Farleys since the showdown in the Black Jack saloon.

It was nearing noon when the cowboy dismounted at the top of the trail and stared at a deep lake. Four or five miles long, and a mile across, with the deep blue of the sky mirrored in its smooth depths. Tall Douglas firs and stately pines fringing the borders to run down the slopes of the Seven Sisters for uncounted miles.

The outlet of the lake flowed down the north end to furnish water for the C Cross C cattle. High Rock laid to the south. If the lake emptied in that direction, the Farley Lumber Company could save many thousands of dollars each year. Old Charley Condon held his leases with water rights, while the lumber company owned only the surface or lumber privileges.

A movement in the brush caught the attention of the cowboy, and he slipped across the pine needles like an Indian with his Winchester at the ready. He smiled when he saw the familiar figure of Bear Trap Lee, cruising timber for the next season's cut. The lumberjack saw him at the same time, and the two men met in a grassy glade at the edge of the lake.

"Heeled like usual," Bear Trap growled. "While all I got is this rule in my hands."

"Fair enough," the cowboy grinned. "I ain't looking for trouble, Bear Trap. I come up here to look for water, and cattle."

"Some day I'll get you in my hands," and the bully smiled to show his broken teeth. "They call me Bear Trap for a good reason."

Tie-Fast dropped his left hand and

tapped the skinning knife in his belt. "I got cold steel to keep you honest," he grinned back. "She's a right purty lake, Bear Trap."

"Drop that gun easy-like, and elevate careful," a cool voice interrupted. "I've got you covered, cowboy!"

The Texan turned his head and stiffened when Oak Farley stepped from behind a giant pine with a 30-30 in his brown hands. Stiff-brimmed hat set well back on his curly head; corded riding breeches tucked down into high-laced boots. A smile of triumph on his handsome face with even white teeth clicking between full parted lips.

Tie-Fast sighed and dropped his Winchester. Bear Trap stepped up with lips curling over his broken teeth. Unbuckled the cartridge belt and threw it back among the brush while Oak Farley came forward with rifle cocked and ready.

"We were baiting a bear trap," the lumberman announced quietly. "Saw you coming way down the trail. Bear Trap had his section scaled last week, but we heard you were coming up to see Mirror lake. So you came."

"Yeah; I'm here," Tie-Fast agreed. "What's the play, Farley?"

"You and him," Farley answered briefly, and shrugged. "You boasted that you tied fast to anything you dabbed your twine on. Now you have the chance to dab it on Bear Trap. Take him, Lee!"

Bear Trap Lee hunched his shoulders and weaved forward. The Texan stepped back; stopped when Farley's gun touched his spine.

"Fist fighting is out of my line," he drawled. "Now you take hot lead or cold steel. . ."

"We ain't taking either one this morning," Farley interrupted coldly. "You talked big back in High Rock, but now it's man to man. Better protect yourself!"

Tie-Fast saw the plot then. No weapons to bring down the wrath of the law. Lumber jacks settled their differences with fists and their calked boots, and he shuddered when he glanced down at the foot-gear of his stocky enemy. Bear Trap Lee who could crush a man's ribs in his powerful arms; could break his back like a stick.

Now the lumberjack was weaving in like a giant grizzly blocking a one-way trail. Tie-Fast leaped forward and jabbed with his left. Felt his arm numb to the elbow when the blow landed on the rocky jaw of Bear Trap Lee. Crossed with his right brought up from his boot tops with all his weight behind the blow.

The lumberjack grunted and rocked on his heels. Came forward in that same weaving crouch with arms feinting for a punch. The cowboy leaped back; stopped when the rifle pressed against his spine to cut off retreat. Bear Trap waded in and lunged with his right arm cocked for the kill.

The cowboy side-slipped and hammered a shower of blows to the leering face. Yipped when blood spattered from the mashed lips of his enemy. But Bear Trap shook his head and kept on grinning like a rabid wolf. Kept on weaving in like a mountain grizzly after a yearling colt.

Jabbed with his left and bellowed with glee when his blow knocked the cowboy off balance and lowered his guard. Jabbed again with his left and crashed over a bruising right that whistled with devastating viciousness.

The blow caught Tie-Fast on the chest and knocked him sprawling. For one time the rifle did not touch his back. Oak Farley had stepped back to let him fall, and the cowboy rolled like a buckaroo

taking a fall from a maddened broomtail.

Bear Trap slid forward on thick short legs. Tie-Fast came to his feet in a looping roll; was picked up like a straw when the lumberjack leaned forward with arms cradled. Then he was snatched against the great hairy chest of Bear Trap before he could rally his reeling senses.

"Spring it!"

The voice of Oak Farley shouting encouragement with the rifle in his hands. Bear Trap lowered the boom. Closed his great hairy arms like the steel jaws of a Number 2 Hudson Bay. Dots splashed in front of the cowboy's vision. His breath wheezed from his lungs like an accordion in the hands of a master. His knees buckled, and the lumberjack shifted his hands for the master stroke.

The squeeze that would crush the ribs of his enemy like jack-straws in the wind!

Tie-Fast shifted his feet and slipped his hands under the pits of those crushing arms. Jerked with his thumbs biting deep into hidden nerve centers. Bucked his back when Bear Trap shrieked with pain and dropped his arms. Side-stepped like a twisting bucker to put the lumberjack between himself and the rifle.

Shifted again when Oak Farley raced around the bulk of his henchman with the cocked rifle in his hands. And while he shifted, the cowboy slapped the back of his neck and came out with a thin-bladed knife in his right hand.

Like a buck deer charging a grizzly, the cowboy leaped upon Bear Trap Lee and jabbed with his knife. His left arm locked in the right arm of the lumberjack; whirled him in a pivoting circle while his deep voice drawled at Oak Farley.

"Drop that gun or I'm going to push this *cuchillo* in up to the hilt and walk around this hombre in a circle. Pronto, feller!"

Oak Farley dropped the gun and raised his hands. Bear Trap Lee was trembling like a leaf in the mountain wind; his beefy face drained of all color. Tie-Fast pushed him back and picked up the 30-30. Ripped up savagely with his right hand to slit the heavy woolen shirt of Bear Trap Lee from belly to neck.

"I ain't a killer," he growled savagely. "But you gents hit the high spots before I do you a meanness. *Vamos!*"

"Just a minute, Mister Condon. I have you covered!"

The cowboy froze when that feminine voice purred against his ear drums like a cat baiting a mouse. Triumph in those silky tones; the voice of Martha Farley; kinsfolk of the grinning Oak.

"Shoot," he said calmly. "And right then is when I press trigger to down that cousin of yores. Let it drop, gal!"

"You'd shoot him?" And the girl's voice expressed stunned surprise.

"I'd shoot him like a mad wolf, ma'am. He held the drop on me while that curly wolf stripped my six-gun off. After which he tells that monkey man to lower the boom. Stopped me with a gun in my back when I tried to back away from the bear trap. Reckon you better drop hammer, Miss Marthy!"

"Oh! I can't do it," and there was agony in the husky voice of the girl. "Please don't shoot him, Tie-Fast!"

"Yes'm. Lower yore gun, ma'am, and let's us make medicine. Seems like you think a powerful lot of a no good skunk like yore manager!"

"I heard about Saturday night," the girl almost whispered. "You wanted to cut them down in cold blood."

"Yes'm," the cowboy agreed quietly. "You ever see a gent with his back plumb broke, ma'am?"

The girl shuddered and lowered her rifle. "He ought to be killed like a lobo," she whispered. "But somehow I thought you were different, Tie-Fast Condon!"

"No'm," and the cowboy shrugged indifferently. "I ain't no different with snakes and curly wolves, ma'am. I kills 'em on sight without no conscience atall!"

"You better go back to camp, Oak," and the girl's voice was strained with suppressed anger. "I saw the whole thing from up on the ridge!"

Oak Farley ruffled his hackles. "Since when are you giving me orders?" he demanded gruffly. "I'm still manager of the lumber company!"

"And I own seventy percent of the stock," the girl rapped sharply. "With Mr. Condon's consent, I'm ordering you back to camp!"

"Jake with me, lady," and the Texan grinned through battered lips. "If he was working for me, I'd give him his time and send him out to ride grub-line."

Oak Farley gritted his teeth while he glared at the smiling Texan. Tie-Fast depressed the muzzle of the rifle and levered the mazagine empty. Tossed the gun to Farley after retrieving his own cartridge belt from the brush.

"Get goin'," he said softly. "Bear Trap stays here till Timber Cronk arrives. I see him cutting down that hog-back yonder."

Oak Farley glanced at the ridge and swung about on his heel. "You'll hear from me," he promised grimly. "I'll talk to you at home, Martha."

"I'll do the talking," the girl corrected quietly, and bit her lips when Farley trotted among the trees.

"Can't we patch this trouble up?" she asked Tie-Fast. "There is plenty of room for both of us."

"Pears like they ain't," the cowboy rumbled slowly. "The lumber company is trying to take water we need for cattle."

"We'll get it, too," Bear Trap muttered. "Oak Farley always gets what he wants, even when it comes to wimmin."

Tie-Fast stared at the lumberjack; turned his eyes to the girl. Martha Farley flushed and bit her lip. The cowboy shrugged carelessly.

"That's yore own business, ma'am," he answered slowly. "But down in Texas we don't allow saddle bums to talk with their mouths about our women folks."

"Oak Farley is my second cousin," the girl answered sharply.

"An' Oak done spoke for her hand," Bear Trap gloated. "So it's all in the family, Texan."

Timber Cronk rode up to stop whatever reply the girl was about to make. He glanced at Tie-Fast and turned his gaze on the battered features of Bear Trap Lee. Spat on the off-side of his horse before his booming voice addressed the lumberjack.

"Looks like you set another bear trap," he remarked casually. "And it looks to me like you caught yoreself a wild cat."

"Me and him augered you might say," and the Texan grinned at Cronk. "Only

there was a 30-30 in the back of the trap. Oak Farley took it with him when Miss Marthy sent him packing."

MURDER!

Timber Cronk swung to the ground and glared at Bear Trap Lee. He spoke over his shoulder to the cowboy.

"You preferring charges ag'in' this here animal?"

Tie-Fast shook his head slowly. "No charges," he answered quietly. "But the next time he tries to crack my ribs, I aim to drill him center and leave him for the wolves."

"You git out of here, Bear Trap," and the constable pointed over the ridge. "Next time you get in a jam, I aim to blow yore key-log to Kingdom Come."

"You'll do what Oak Farley tells you to do," the lumberjack muttered. "And I'll tell him what you said."

"You tell him any lies, I'll give you a chance to try that bear trap on me," Cronk growled savagely. "You shaggy son of a bear!"

"They ain't no time like now," and the lumberjack puckered his lips and spat on the constable's laced boots.

Timber Cronk stepped forward swiftly with both arms pumping. He rocked Bear Trap back on his heels with straight rights and lefts that thudded like rocks. The lumberjack took the blows and kept coming in. Timber Cronk leaped high in the air and turned with his right boot kicking backward.

The calked boot landed full in Bear Trap's face and kicked him backwards to the ground. Timber Cronk came down on both hands and one knee. Righted himself like a cat and jumped the prostrate man with both boots kicking a thudding tattoo.

"Crack! Crack!"

Like the faint snap of a match, two rifle shots came drifting down the wind as Timber Cronk doubled over and crashed to the ground. Martha Farley jerked her face from the shelter of her arms and stared at the Texan.

"You shot him," she accused slowly. "Shot him when he was fighting your enemy."

"Reckon you better keep yore eyes open after this," the cowboy drawled with contempt. "You don't see no gun in my hand, and that shot came from up yonder on the ridge. Reckon it was meant for me, but I moved out of line when Timber hopped that buzzard with his boots. What you think now, ma'am?"

The girl glanced up at the ridge and back to the Texan. "You mean—you mean Oak did it?" she whispered.

Tie-Fast shrugged. "I ain't saying for sure, but it looks that away, Miss Martha. Yonder comes Corb Jason fanning his hoss down th' hind legs hell for leather."

Corb Jason slide his horse to a stop and lit a-running. His right hand slapped down and came up bristling with cocked Colt. His voice was flat and brittle when he snapped the stick-up command at Tie-Fast Condon.

"Git 'em up, cowboy. You killed my riding pard, and I'm taking you in for murder!"

The Texan swung about slowly and raised his hands. "Get some savvy, you old raw-hider," he drawled slowly. "My gun ain't been shot like you can see if you use yore eyes. Cronk was downed by some drygulchin' skunk up on the ridge yonder."

The constable turned to the girl. "Speak up, Miss Marthy. This jigger speaking with a straight tongue?"

The girl nodded slowly. "We were both right here," she answered shakily. "Timber Cronk kicked Bear Trap in the face. It was terrible. I hid my face so I couldn't see when he jumped Bear Trap with those awful boots. Then I heard a shot, and Timber fell down right where you see him."

Bear Trap Lee shuddered and crawled slowly to his feet. His face was cut with deep gashes where the sharp calks had scored a passage. Then he saw Timber Cronk on the ground and started for the fallen man.

"Yere! You jump that corpse an' dang if I don't let daylight through you in chunks!"

Bear Trap Lee stopped suddenly and shook his shaggy head like a bear. For the first time he became aware of the two men and Martha Farley, and his little piggish eyes wandered back to stare at Timber Cronk.

"You said corpse?" he whispered hoarsely, and then his face twisted into a wolfish grin. "There's the feller what did it," and pointed at Tie-Fast. "I seen him shoot him with his hand gun!"

The Texan filled his hand and reversed the butt. Handed it to Corb Jason without a word. The constable took the gun and checked the loads. Smelled the barrel and returned the gun to the silent cowboy.

"Guess again, Bear Trap," he growled. "That gun ain't been fired recent. Now we got to get Timber back to town."

"Who you callin' uh corpse?"

Corb Jason whirled on his heel in time to see Timber Cronk stagger to his feet. Tie-Fast ran to the constable; steadied him with an arm which Cronk brushed away angrily.

"Creased me on the skull, that's what he done." Timber Cronk rubbed his head and shook crimson trickles from his fingers. "We got to get him, Corb."

"Get who?" and Corb Jason almost shouted the question.

"Old Charley Condon," the constable accused bitterly. " I seen him up on the ridge when I come down here to stop a fight."

"Whoa up a spell and stand hitched, old hoss," the Texan drawled softly. "What about Oak Farley that I choused over that hog-back?"

Timber Cronk scratched his head slowly. "Hell," he muttered. "It couldn't have been Oak. I'm working for him in a manner of speaking."

"An' I'm working for old Charley," Tie-Fast snapped. "Now you think her out straight, old timer. I talked salty to Oak Farley and run him to hell-an'-gone over the ridge. You can ask Miss Marthy here."

"I don't know," the girl said slowly. "Mister Condon chased Oak away like he said, but Oak wouldn't shoot a man from ambush."

"Who Are You Calling A Corpse?"

"Meaning that old Charley of the C Cross C would bushwhack a man?" and the Texan's voice registered stunned amazement.

"All this here has started since you rode into High Rock," Timber Cronk boomed hoarsely. "Now I'm going to track down Charley Condon and throw him in jail for trial."

"That's right," Corb Jason agreed quietly. "Me; I'm going to do the same for Oak Farley unless he beats me to town. We got to uphold the law in these hills, Timber."

Timber Cronk glared at Jason. "You got no call to tie into Oak thataway," he rumbled. "It was Charley Condon who fired that shot."

"The shot came from up in that patch of brush yonder," Tie-Fast interrupted. "What you say we all ride up there and read the sign before we go off half-cocked?"

"Up yere in the country we don't need no Texan yearlin' telling the law what to

do," Corb Jason drawled slowly. "But we might as well all ride yonderly for a look-see. Where's yore hoss, gal?"

"Right back here in the trees," and Martha Farley ran out of the clearing.

Tie-Fast caught his bay and swung up to rub stirrups with Corb Jason. The girl followed with Timber Cronk who kept rubbing his right hand on the blackened butt of his old gun. The Texan led the way to the brush where he had seen the smoke; swung down and pushed into the thicket with eyes on the ground. Then he stopped suddenly and fell to his knees beside the body of a man.

"Hell! It's old Charley!"

Corb Jason slid from the saddle and hunkered down beside the body. The old cattleman opened his faded gray eyes and stared into the face of Tie-Fast. Moved his lips weakly, and both constables heard him mutter:

"Oak Farley; shot me in th' back!"

"You gents heard him," and the Texan rose slowly to his feet. "That's murder in any country, and I taken up for the old man!"

Timber Cronk drew his gun and jammed the muzzle against the cowboy's back. "You'll rod that cattle spread and leave th' gittin' to me and Corb Jason," he rumbled. "We're the law up yere in the country!"

"But he was the only kin I had," and the Texan lowered his hands as he turned to face Timber Cronk.

"You make a pass for that gun, I aim to drop hammer!"

The tall constable meant what he said as he covered Tie-fast Condon. The Texan stared at him for a long moment. Turned to Corb Jason.

"Yo're cow-country folks, Corb," he pleaded. "Let me run this ring-tailed lobo down on my own."

"Can't do her, son," and Corb Jason averted his face when he spoke. "Me an' Timber is the law up here, and we got to fog it now to beat Oak Farley back to town. You look after old Charley."

The Texan watched the two constables mount their horses and go spurring down the slope. The girl was kneeling beside his uncle when he turned again, and he hunkered down when the old cattleman's lips began to move.

"Promise me, Tie-Fast," old Charley muttered weakly, and tiny bubbles of frothy crimson stood out on his bearded lips.

"I promise, Charley," the Texan answered huskily. "Give it a name."

"I was watchin' the fight," the old cattleman said slowly, and the girl leaned over to wipe his lips. "A rifle boomed behind me, an' I saw Cronk fall. Then it boomed again before I could turn. It was Farley, an' I want you to square up for me."

The Texan reached down and gripped the dying man's hand. "Count her done, Charley," he answered huskily. "Hope you . . . you have a pleasant trip, old feller."

Old Charley Condon smiled and closed his eyes. Tie-Fast sat close and held the gnarled old hand in his own. Martha Farley watched for a moment and started to cry, and the Texan spoke gently as he covered the still face with the shapless old Stetson.

"You mind leading up his hoss? I got to take him back on his saddle."

The girl jumped to her feet and fled through the trees, thankful to escape from death. The Texan tied the horse to a tree; lifted the body with the help of the girl and laid it face down across the saddle. Tied ankles and wrists, and there was a catch in his throat that he could not stifle.

"I'll be going home now, and thank you kindly, Miss Marthy," he murmured.

"I'm sorry about Uncle Charley, but glad you made up your mind to let the law handle things," and the girl searched his tanned face as she spoke.

Tie-Fast looked at her with narrowed

eyes. "You heard me make a promise to old Charley," he said slowly, but his voice edged up rough in spots. "You ever hear of a Texan breaking his word to a dying man?"

"You mean you are going to kill Oak?" the girl gasped, and again that look of terror crept into her eyes.

"I aim to try," the Texan answered. "Might be he's the best man. You worried any about it?"

The girl shuddered. "I thought you were different," she repeated again. "There was a look in your eyes I liked when I first met you."

Tie-Fast shrugged carelessly. "Yo're spoke for," he said roughly. "Bear Trap bragged about it."

"Men are all alike," the girl blazed suddenly. "They kill each other if they get angry, and they all think they can take what they want."

"Not wanting anything, Ma'am," the cowboy contradicted softly. "Excepting to get back home with the dead, so's I can get started to hunting down the killer. I get my rope on that hombre, I aim to stay till one of us loses all interest in breathing the pure mountain air of High Rock."

"Timber Cronk and Corb Jason will get him," the girl pleaded softly. "Promise me . . . Tie-Fast."

"You might get Oak Farley to promise you," the cowboy grunted coldly. "I done made me one promise today, an' I aim to keep it regardless."

"I hate you! Don't ever speak to me again!"

Tie-Fast raised his Stetson and picked up the bridle reins. Then he caught sight of a hulking figure coming up the slope and changed his mind about speaking.

"Better be getting along home, Miss Marthy," he said more gently. "Yonder comes Bear Trap up th' hill, an' he might be ugly. I'll wait here till yo're out of sight."

The girl glanced at the lumberjack and spurred her horse. "Thank you," she called throatily. "I can take care of myself."

The cowboy tightened his lips and waited for Bear Trap. Stared hard into the bleeding face when the lumberjack stopped to gaze at the body of the old cattleman tied to the saddle. Beaten as he was, Bear Trap managed a grin.

"Oak got him," he gloated. "He'll git you next, Texan."

Tie-Fast stared into the little black eyes without speaking. Once his right hand rubbed the grip of his Colt. Bear Trap laughed hoarsely and moved on up the hill like a great shambling bear. When he was out of sight, the cowboy touched his horse with a spur and rode slowly back to the C Cross C with his dead.

THE UNWRITTEN LAW

Corb Jason and Timber Cronk thundered across the bridge and into High Rock with horses dripping lather. Rounded the turn and pounded to the jail where a tall roan stood sweating with head hung low. Both constables hit the dirt while their horses were skidding to a stop on bunched hoofs.

Corb Jason threw back the jail door and barged over the sill with gun in hand. Timber Cronk right on his heels to back up his riding-pard on the other half of the law. Corb Jason stopped abruptly and stiffened with disappointment. Holstered his gun with a slap while he stared into the smiling face of Oak Farley.

"I come in to surrender to the law," the lumberman explained without emotion. "I shot a man back yonder in the timber."

"You shot old Charley Condon of the C Cross C," Jason almost snarled. "That there's murder, Farley!"

"An' you drygulched me with the same gun!"

Timber Cronk sided forward to glare at the tall lumberman. His big hands were

clenched into fists with the knuckles showing white. Oak Farley shrugged his square shoulders.

"I saved your life back there, Timber," he answered quietly. "That was how come me to shoot old Condon. He had you lined under his sights, and I pressed trigger just about the same time he did. Hadn't been for my slug catching him, you'd be deader than hell!"

Timber Cronk stepped back and drew a deep breath. His black eyes turned to study Corb Jason's face; turned back to stare at Oak Farley.

"So that's the straight of it," he muttered. "Now that does make more sense. I work in timber, and Condon owned cattle. Bear Trap is Cruiser for the Lumber company, while Tie-Fast rods the C Cross C. You git it, Corb?"

Corb Jason was studying the smooth face of the lumberman. His gray eyes bit deep as though he were probing for the truth, Oak Farley stared back levelly without winking. The constable spoke first, and his voice was filled with scorn.

"So you high-tailed it for jail before me and Timber could catch you," he accused. "Seems to me like a man would have stayed up there by the body when the law was so close!"

Farley shrugged. "I helped the law, and then I rode according to the unwritten law," he answered quietly. "I beat both you and Timber to jail, and I'll stand my trial."

"But this here is killing," and Corb Jason frowned. "For all we know, it might be murder."

"Timber and old Charley had words," Farley explained. "I find that old he-bull hiding up there on the ridge with his sights lined on Timber's back. I cut down on him with my rifle to save the law, and you call it murder!"

Timber Cronk fidgeted on his big feet. "He give himself up to the law, and he beat us to jail, Corb. What you think?"

"He won't be acquitted! Ole Charley Condon never had trouble with no man till Farley took over the Lumber company!"

"That's because yo're cattle folks," Timber Cronk answered gruffly. "Old Charley was a pard of yores, but he was fixing to rub me out, and I'm half th' law up here in th' country."

All three men paused to listen when galloping hoofs thundered across the bridge. Waited until the horse raced up the street to stop in front of the jail. All three frowned with annoyance when Martha Farley swung to the ground and spilled through the door.

"You beat the law to jail," she said to Oak Farley. "I knew you would, Oak!"

Contempt in her husky voice, and in the glance of her brown eyes. Farley flushed and stepped forward with a curse on his lips.

"I told you to go home," he snapped. "This trouble is between men!"

"I'm not so sure," the girl answered coldly. "Men usually stay to face things out instead of running away. You ran like a scared deer after you shot poor old Uncle Charley Condon!"

"Just a minute, Miss Marthy," Timber Cronk interrupted. "You ain't got the straight of this. Condon had his sights lined on my back; was pressing trigger when Oak cut down on him. Otherwise that slug would have found my heart instead of just creasing my scalp the way it done."

"Oak! Is that the truth?"

The girl watched Oak Farley closely as she asked the question. Farley shrugged and spread his hands. Jerked his head toward the Winchester at his side.

"Take a look at my gun," he said quietly. "One shot fired, is all."

Corb Jason picked up the rifle and ejected the shells. Turned to Timber Cronk with a frown on his hard face. Shook his head slowly from side to side with teeth biting his lower lip.

"One shell fired," he corroborated.

"Course, a gent could slip another shell into the magazine."

"Just a minute!"

Oak Farley's tone was crisp when he barked at the constable. Anger showed on his smooth face, and in his flashing brown eyes.

"I'm waiting," Jason nodded.

"You ain't the judge or jury," Farley continued. "You are only a peace officer, and I have surrendered to the law. Now I demand a fair trial, and the protection of the law until proven innocent!"

"You'll get it," and Timber Cronk also nodded his head.

"Right or wrong, you always plays a shore thing, don't you?" Corb Jason made no attempt to conceal his contempt. "You was the one what framed that law about carrying guns on Sattiday night, and then you pack a hide-out. You trap the Texan up there in the Seven Sisters, take his weapons, and turn yore man-killer loose on him while you hold yore gun at his back. Then you shoots old Charley and claims an alibi. After which you beats the law by getting back to jail way ahead of time!"

Oak Farley shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Like I pointed out, you are not the judge," he answered smoothly. "Now I demand arraignment, and release on bond."

Again the thunder of hoofs clattering over the bridge before Corb Jason could answer. Again they waited until a horse slid to a stop in front of the jail, and Timber Cronk moved his big bulk to hide Oak Farley. Both officers had their guns in hand when Tie-Fast Condon leaped across the sill with his hand on his gun.

"Where is he? I taken up for old Charley!"

Timber Cronk held the drop and stared at the cowboy without blinking. "Don't draw," he warned. "This here ain't Texas, Tie-Fast!"

Corb Jason stepped forward and jammed his gun in the cowboy's belly while his left hand lifted the forty-five Colt from the moulded holster. A holster that was now tied-down and toed-in for a quick draw.

"Got it to do, Tie-Fast," Jason muttered. "Oak Farley done surrendered hisself to the law. He gets a fair trial!"

Timber Cronk moved away from in front of the lumberman. The Texan took a step forward; checked himself when Corb Jason jabbed the gun deeper in his middle. Timber Cronk held the drop with thumb dogging back the hammer.

"The unwritten law!" Blind anger in the shouted statement that sounded strangely like an insult from the lips of the Texan. "The man who beats the law to jail is bound to be acquitted. And up here in *The Country*, you calls that law!"

"That's right," and Oak Farley smiled lazily. "Sorry to have it to do, but Charley Condon was aiming to kill Timber Cronk when I pressed trigger. There's my gun to prove it!"

"Yo're a liar, Farley! Yo're a double-barreled liar four times that I know of!"

Oak Farley also stepped forward. "Don't crowd your luck, Texan," he warned, and two spots of color glowed high on his cheeks. "You are a stranger here in High Rock, but the man don't live who can call me a liar and get away with it clean!"

Tie-Fast Condon stared for a long moment and became more quiet. But his blue eyes were narrowed to slits to match the straight line of his lips when he answered the lumberman.

"Old Charley is dead," he said softly. "He ain't here to defend himself. He talked just before he took the long trail west, and he talked plain while Miss Marthy and me was listenin'. Tell yore cousin what old Charley said, Miss Marthy!"

The girl stared at Farley and gripped her hands tightly. Then she scrutinized each face carefully before she spoke, and her voice was low and throaty with fear and uncertainty.

"Uncle Charley said you shot Timber Cronk," she whispered. "Then he said you shot him in the back before he could turn around."

"He lied!"

Tie-Fast Condon leaped forward like a spring and crashed his right fist against the sneering lips of Oak Farley. Timber Cronk leaned back and brought a whistling uppercut screaming from his boot-tops. The blow caught the Texan behind the ear and dropped him like a poleaxed steer.

Oak Farley had also gone down, but he came to his feet with hands gripping the rifle. His finger pressed the trigger one time before Corb Jason jumped him to wrest the long gun away.

"I ought to bend the barrel of this over yore skull," the old cattleman growled savagely. "Lucky I emptied that magazine when I did, or they shore as hell would be a murder charge against you that would stick."

"The man don't walk that can slug me," the lumberman shouted, and his left hand darted toward the left side of his vest.

Corb Jason swung the rifle sideways like a club. The heavy walnut stock thudded against Oak Farley's head and sent him to the ground face-forward. Timber Cronk glared at his partner, six-gun in his big fist.

"You killed him," he accused bitterly. "Just because I had to buffalo this cowboy!"

Corb Jason straightened up and glared at his fellow officer. "You get some sense, or it might be between you and me," he warned quietly. "That big jigger was just about to trigger a slug into a man on the ground. You heard him snap th' trigger, only I had unloaded that 30-30!"

Timber Cronk shuffled his feet and dropped his eyes. Then he holstered his gun and stepped up to Corb Jason with his horny hand extended.

"Yo're right, cowboy," he admitted quietly. "As I sees it, we rode both sides of the law like usual. Now what we going to do?"

"You stay here and arraign Oak Farley before the Justice," Jason growled. "I'll load the Texan on his hoss and start for the C Cross C before he rouses round. Got to git him out of town before he wakes up."

"There's Miss Marthy," and Timber Cronk scratched his head. "How about you, Ma'am?"

"I'll ride with Corb," the girl answered without hesitation. "Oak spoke out of turn about . . . the dead. I want to tell Tie-Fast that all the Farleys are not built like that!"

Corb Jason jerked his head at Cronk and lifted the Texan's feet. They carried him from the jail and sat him up in the saddle with long arms hanging down on each side of the bay's smooth neck. Jason mounted and took the bridle reins; rode out of town and across the bridge with the girl holding the cowboy in the saddle.

Tie-Fast stirred when the horses clopped across the heavy planking on the bridge. Pushed himself erect a moment later and twisted his head painfully. Twice he closed his eyes and opened them quickly when he saw Martha Farley riding beside him.

"What happened?" he muttered thickly.

His own words seemed to work a miracle. He snapped erect in the saddle and reached for the whangs. Corb Jason spurred his horse and tightened the bridle reins. The girl leaned over and gripped the cowboy by the shoulder when he made a savage attempt to get control of the bay.

"Take it easy, Tie-Fast," she pleaded. "Corb and I will tell you all about it!"

"Tell me nothing! Turn loose them bridle reins, Jason!"

Corb Jason checked his horse and handed the bridle reins to the Texan. Then he held his hand on the bit while he talked to the cowboy earnestly.

"He gits a fair trial, Tie-Fast. He come in and surrendered. You'll get the same some time," he added significantly.

Tie-Fast Condon quieted down with the

last words. "Yeah," he sighed wearily. "I'll be needing it."

"Timber had to lower the boom on you," Corb Jason explained dryly. "After which Farley grabbed his Winchester and pressed trigger, but I had done pulled all her fangs."

"Yeah? What happened to Farley then?"

"Corb hit him over the head with the rifle," and a song of gladness made the girl's voice hum. "I think Corb hit Oak for talking like he did about . . . Uncle Charley!"

The Texan rubbed his aching head and turned to the constable. "Thanks, Corb," he muttered softly. "You and me is both cow people even if you do pack the star. Now I want to be by my lonesome, and I'll thank you and Miss Marthy to ride on back to High Rock."

"But you might need some help," the girl objected.

The Texan shook his head and averted his face. "Don't need none," he almost whispered. "I'm setting up with old Charley tonight, and we're putting him away come sun-up. I'll thank you kindly to ride back now!"

DYNAMITE

Tie-fast Condon leaned against the bars of the holding pen while his blue eyes stared across the mountain meadow where a low picket fence marked the resting place of old Charley. He turned his head stiffly when Idaho Cawley spurred into the yard. Watched indifferently while the buckaroo stepped down and anchored his horse with trailing reins.

The young Texan was owner of the biggest cattle spread in the Seven Sisters, but he would have traded it all back to have old Charley rubbing stirrups with him on the mountain trails. Grass-fed steers branded C Cross C dotted the range wherever he looked. Prices were up and feed plentiful, but the young Texan was thinking of his promise to a dying man.

Idaho Cawley shouted as he came high-heeling it across the dusty yard. Shouted excitedly as he pointed down to the cut in the valley where Devil river brawled noisily over the rocks. Even then the young ramrod noticed no difference until Idaho repeated his message.

"They went and done her, Boss. Devil river started running down the other way!"

"Huh? Running what other way!"

"Dang if I know, Tie-Fast. But we ain't got no water to speak of down this side of the Divide. Cast yore eyes over that river!"

Tie-Fast turned his head stiffly and stared at the river. No foam to mark the leaping rush of water over the rocks. No purr of waterfalls where the salmon and steelhead leaped high in spawning season. Only deep pools where the water had drilled into the rock year after year.

Tie-Fast looked dully at the empty river and swung his gaze back to the new grave over by the spring. The buckaroo watched while the Texan roped out his bay gelding; waited while Tie-Fast saddled up and stuck a carbine under the fender.

"Line out and get Curly Peters an' Hank Tuttle. They're down at the branding pen in the hollow."

Idaho raced away, and the Texan walked to the tack room and threw a pair of *apparejos* in back of his cantle. Mexican saddlepacks cut square with one on each side. Then he took some yellow tubes from a box and packed them carefully in the pockets. Smooth waxy cylinders of destruction.

He was ready when the three cowboys came loping across the mountain pasture. Tall boys grown up, with the eager light of adventure in their clear eyes. Idaho stared hard at the *apparejos*.

"What you packing in them Spic saddlebags, Boss?"

"Dynamite!"

"Dynamite?"

"You heard me. Oak Farley has built

him a dam up there at the wrong end of Mirror Lake. I saw it the day I had that ruckus with Bear Trap Lee."

"Was me, I'd ride to High Rock and settle that big jack once and for all time," and Idaho glanced suggestively at the new grave.

Tie-Fast shrugged impatiently. "I ain't forgetting," he answered grimly. "But old Charley has only slept out there two days. We got other things to do first off."

He led the way up the steep slope in silence. The three cowboys glanced at each other and checked the loads in their guns. Idaho Cawley nodded with understanding and waved his hand at the picket fence. Murmured a promise under his breath.

"We'll ride the river with him, old Charley!"

Curly Peters and Hank Tuttle nodded solemnly. They liked this young Texan who always seemed to know what he was doing. Liked the cold clear blue of his eyes that could warm up with fun, or grow cold like glare ice on Mirror Lake in December. A pard to ride the river with!

On top of the Divide, Mirror Lake stretched away like smooth blue glass. The only difference was in Devil River which served as an outlet to water the C Cross C range. Now the channel was blocked with great Douglas firs covered with granite boulders. The lake was backed up against the barrier; was spilling joyously through a new channel leading down to High Rock where the Farley sawmills shrieked with busy activity.

A steady flow of logs was passing down the new channel with nimble lumber jacks riding high; expert in spinning the bucking logs with the sharpened calks on their laced boots.

"Unload, and tie yore horses back in the brush!"

Tie-Fast suited his words by leading the way. Handed wax cylinders to the three men after clamping caps to the candle-like ends. Then he walked like a cat out on the dam and dumped his load in a deep hole. Fitted a fuse and waited until the three cowboys had followed his example in three different places.

"Touch them go-devils off and run like hell," he ordered crisply. "Get back among the trees all ready to ride when the blow-up comes!"

Curly Peters lighted his fuse and raced to shore. Hank Tuttle followed, with Idaho Cawley a close third. Tie-Fast flicked a match with his thumb nail and watched the snaky sputter as the fuse took hold.

All four hit saddles at the same time and reached for their Winchesters. Raced through the trees toward the lower end of where the lumberjacks were guiding the giant logs through the new channel.

"Get down," Tie-Fast shouted, and slid from the saddle. "We can watch them fellers from here!"

Holding to tight bridle reins, the four cowboys hunkered in the brush and waited. A dull boom split the morning air like sullen thunder. A second shot echoed closely, but the big explosion came when the fuse burnt down to the pocket of dynamite Tie-Fast had cached.

Flame and rocks leaped high in the air to make a geyser forty feet high, and the cowboys fought their horses down as the animals plunged madly with fright. The Texan was the first in the saddle with Winchester clutched in his right hand.

"C'mon," he shouted. "We're runnin' them lumberjacks to hell and gone."

Racing through the trees to where the timber crew were scuttling ashore. Straight up to the group of brawny woodsmen who faced them with peaveys clutched in both hands. Bear Trap Lee came forward with a low growl when Tie-Fast swung to the ground.

"Now we got you! Yo're trespassin' on lumber property!"

The three cowboys sat their saddles with

Winchesters covering the crowd. Tie-Fast slogged his long gun in the saddle-boot and walked forward. Stopped a few paces from the bully while he spoke to the other lumberjacks.

"You fellers make a move and yo're wolf bait. Me and him has a score to settle!"

Bear Trap Lee whooped and flung his heavy peavey aside. Ripped off his mackinaw and tore at the collar of his wool shirt. Leaped high in the air and cracked his heels together three times before he hit the ground.

"Happy days," he shouted. "Guns or no guns, I aim to break yore damn back like I promised!"

Tie-Fast glanced at the logs piling up to block the new channel. Smiled grimly when he stepped forward and threw off his tall Stetson. Lunged straight for the grinning bully with both hands jolting like driving rods on the dinky engine back in the cut. No gun at his back this time to keep him from side-slipping.

Bear Trap Lee took the blows on his head and face without giving ground. Weaving like a great bear, he kept coming in with hands feeling for a grip. The Texan lunged forward and planted a right on the bulbous nose. Then he jumped high and turned in the air with his right boot lashing out.

Bear Trap bellowed and caught that lashing boot with both hands. Jerked savagely with all his strength, and sat down on his haunches when the half-boot slipped loose from the cowboy's foot.

Both men rolled on their backs, but the Texan was first man on his feet. He jumped forward and straddled the lumberjack with both feet locking for a cinch-grip. Then his hands went down to circle the bully's neck.

Bear Trap drew in his neck and arched his back; flipped clear, but his head was tilted to one side like a ewe-necked mare. Tie-Fast was on top of him before he could get to his feet; slugging with both hands. Grunted each time his knuckles skinned on the lumberjack's hard head.

Bear Trap rolled over kicking with both feet. The Texan was hurled six feet when the sharp calks bit into his ribs, but he went into a looping roll and scrambled to his feet just as Bear Trap weaved in for the kill, but the Texan side-slipped and kicked his right boot free when the lumberjack stumbled.

"Got yuh!"

Bear Trap turned slowly and stared at the Texan's bare feet. Scraped the sharp calks on his boots like a rooster getting ready to spur. Bellowed like a bull and charged.

Tie-Fast Condon moved like a shadow. He side-stepped and whirled at the same time. His right fist crashed down behind the lumberjack's ear. Sent him to earth. Fighting silently now. Fighting like the savage cavemen fought in the distant past.

Like a flitting shadow, he jumped forward and fastened his hands in the broad belt that held Bear Trap's stagged-off pants. Bent his muscles in one mighty heave that lifted the bully high above his head like a sack of oats.

A bare second he held his squirming enemy while he turned slowly, and then his arms levered down to lower the boom. Bear Trap flashed through the morning sunlight; crashed on a granite rock. Spread his great thick arms wide and relaxed like a broken twig bent down to fit a wedge of stone.

The Texan stared for a moment and faced the silent crowd. "He asked for it," he panted. "Any of you jacks taking up for him?"

A tall figure raced through the trees and flung men aside to face the Texan. Tie-Fast Condon smiled grimly and waited. Timber Cronk threw off his mackinaw and came forward cat-footed.

"I'll settle with you later, Texan," he rumbled. "Right now I got to take out the key-log in that jam yonder!"

"Let the jam go," the Texan breathed heavily. "You'll only kill yoreself, Timber!"

Timber Cronk reached down and seized a discarded peavey. Turned to face the lake where the logs were piling up forty feet high. Tie-Fast leaped forward and grabbed the constable.

"No water," he shouted. "Let it go, Cronk!"

Timber Cronk whirled on the balls of his feet and brought the heavy peavey around. Tie-Fast reached down and swung up from his hip. Caught the constable squarely behind the ear with a crushing haymaker that sent Timber Cronk on his face with a grunt. The Texan stepped back and stared at the unconscious man.

"Had it to do," he muttered. "He was too good a man to lose for the likes of Oak Farley's lumber!"

"You've killed him! You killed the law!"

Tie-Fast turned slowly to face Martha Farley. "No'm," he denied softly. "I saved his life."

"You wouldn't do this if Oak was here," the girl almost shouted. "Oh! I wish he was here!"

"Where is he, ma'am," the cowboy asked, and reached down for his boots. "I'd admire for to meet that jigger personal like you knows!"

"He is still in bed if you must know," the girl sobbed. "Now you have killed Timber Cronk. There has been nothing but trouble since you rode into High Rock!"

"Yes'm," the cowboy agreed. "That *second* cousin of yores planned to hog all our water. He built this dam on government land without permission. I blew it up the same way."

The girl was not even listening to him. Her brown eyes were wide with horror as she stared at Bear Trap Lee. The lumberjack was twisting in agony on the ground; pawing with his legs as he tried to get to his feet.

"You did that?" she whispered.

Tie-Fast nodded carelessly. "I shore did," he admitted brazenly. "That jigger had his mind set on breaking my back like he's crippled a dozen other fellers, and I gave him a taste of his own. That jigger will be a good jack from now on. You got my word for it!"

A dull booming roar sent all eyes out on the lake. Giant logs were twisted and piled in a barricade that would never be broken. The water had lowered as it spilled down the north side of the Divide to water the C Cross C range.

"I hate you," the girl said bitterly. "Hate you like hell!"

Tie-Fast bowed and swung up to the saddle. Took off his hat and bowed again.

"I don't like you any too well myself," he answered. "Good morning, ma'am!"

He rode away without looking back, and the three cowboys wheeled their horses to follow him. Martha Farley stepped forward and stopped Idaho Cawley.

"Tell him," she said distinctly, "that Oak Farley will square up for this as sure as I live. Tell him that I am going to marry Oak before the week is up!"

"I'll tell him, Miss Marthy," Idaho answered gravely. "But from where I sit, I don't think it makes any difference to Tie-Fast who you marry."

OAK FARLEY STANDS TRIAL

Tie-Fast Condon entered the crowded court room with Curly Peters and Idaho Cawley. Oak Farley was in the prisoner's box, and the cowboy narrowed his eyes and stared until a hard hand reached out and whirled him right about.

"You packing a gun?"

Tie-Fast smiled at Timber Cronk. "Nary a smoke-pole, Timber," he answered slowly. "I just come to watch how the law worked here in High Rock."

"I ain't forgot the day before yesterday

when you lowered the boom on me," and Timber Cronk scowled while he rubbed the back of his left ear.

"That evens us up," the cowboy answered soberly. "Only reason I done it was to save a good man from getting himself killed. Meaning yoreself, Timber."

" 'Bliged to you," and the constable held out his hand. "That log jam caved in the back not more than ten minutes after you rode away. Now I'm asking for your promise, Texan."

"Yeah," and the cowboy studied the big constable. "Give it a name, Timber."

"Yore word that you won't start nothing with Oak Farley here in town no matter what happens. What's the word, cowboy?"

"I promise," Tie-Fast answered slowly.

The judge was a little man with a round bald head. Blackstone collar winged back to give clearance to his Adam's apple; the only white collar in High Rock, and it celluloid. Gray striped pants tucked in cowboy boots, with warped legs to fit a regulation stock saddle.

Judge Carruthers was small, but no one in High rock had ever known him to back up a step. He could cut off a turkey's head at fifty feet with his old single action, and the judge had good eyesight.

"This prisoner, Oak Farley, has been tried by a jury of his peers," he began solemnly. "Did you fellers come to a verdict?"

Idaho Cawley stretched to his feet and fiddled with a paper. The lanky cowboy had been elected foreman of the jury, and

"The Prisoner Will Stand Up!"

"But remember that you asked me not to *start* nothing."

"Oak Farley won't start a ruckus," and Timber Cronk glared at the lumberman. "Pass in and take yore seats. Idaho is on the jury."

Judge Obidiah Carruthers rapped on the bench with the butt of his six-gun. Glared at cowboys and lumberjacks alike until conversation ceased. After which he cleared his throat and called Oak Farley to the stand.

The lumberman was poised and confident while he told his story. Timber Cronk took the stand and added his testimony. Tie-Fast followed him and spoke only to answer questions. Martha Farley gave the same answers, and returned to her seat behind the prisoner.

The court room buzzed when the jury of six cowboys and six lumberjacks filed out of the room. They were back in less than fifteen minutes; took their seats and waited for the judge to speak.

now he opened the paper and swallowed noisily.

"We shore did, judge," he answered slowly, but his voice could be heard all over the crowded room. "By reason of the evidence presented, or I might say because they wasn't any, we the jury find the defendant not guilty!"

The lumberjacks clapped their hands and roared their approval. The judge and Oak Farley both stared when all the cowboys also joined in the applause. They both knew what that meant. Oak Farley had been acquitted according to the unwritten law in High Rock. He had made his fight; had beaten the law back to the jail.

"The prisoner will stand up!"

Oak Farley stood up and faced the Bench Judge Carruthers rapped with his six-gun; waited until the crowd became silent.

"Oak Farley, you have been acquitted of murder by a jury of your peers. We both know why, and I want to remark

right here and now that what is law for one man, is law for another. Court is dismissed!"

Tie-Fast Condon was the first man out of the court room. A peculiar happiness was in his heart, and a slight smile robbed his face of the serious look he had carried since old Charley had been laid to rest. Timber Cronk came out to stand at his side; waited until the crowd had thinned out some.

"Wonder what the judge meant?" he said to the Texan.

"I wonder," Tie-Fast answered softly.

Martha Farley came out and walked straight up to the cowboy. Tie-Fast took off his hat and bowed slightly.

"Good morning, Miss Marthy," he said quietly. "Idaho gave me yore message the other night. I wish you luck, ma'am."

The girl blushed. "I was angry," she answered just above a whisper. "I didn't mean what I said, Tie-Fast."

Oak Farley pushed through the door and took the girl's arm. His smooth face was flushed and angry, and the girl tried to release herself from his hold.

"As my promised wife, I object to you having conversation with my enemies," the lumberman growled.

"So you come out in the open for one time an' admit yo're my enemy," the Texan murmured.

"You'll pay for blowing up that dam, and for what you did to Bear Trap Lee," Farley snarled. "I order you to arrest that man, Cronk!"

Timber Cronk turned to Farley with a scowl. "You didn't sign no warrant that I knows of," he rumbled slowly. "That there is a point of law, Oak. That mesa is government land, and it was just as much against the law to build a dam as it was to blow one up. Reckon mebbe you better keep still about that water."

"We got two million feet of timber locked up there in that lake," Farley blustered. "Timber we can't ever get out now that the water is down."

Tie-Fast yawned and looked up the street. "I don't know much about timber, but my cattle is doing pretty well right now," he remarked lightly. "Morning to you, Miss Marthy, and I'm right glad to hear that you changed yore mind about yore second cousin."

Oak Farley stared at the girl and started forward. Planted himself squarely in front of the cowboy with fists doubled into knots of knuckle.

"Keep on talking," and he bit off the words. "You mentioned Miss Farley and myself."

The Texan looked at him lazily. "I made a promise not to *start* anything in town today," he drawled slowly. "Get out of my way, lumberjack!"

"Oak! Please not here on the street!"

Farley turned to the girl and shoved her roughly aside. "Are you giving me orders again?" he said coldly.

Tie-Fast leaned over and jerked the lumberman around. "I'll tell you," he said coldly. "Miss Marthy told me she had changed her mind about marrying a skunk like you. That's all, and I'm going away from here!"

His blue eyes were flashing with anticipation as he shouldered against Oak Farley to clear his way. The lumberman growled deep in his throat and lashed out with a jolting left. The cowboy ducked under the punch and countered with a whistling right that caught Farley on the jaw and knocked him sprawling to the middle of the street.

The lumberman rolled like a cat and came back charging. Corb Jason stepped from the court room and shoved Farley off balance while his right hand slapped down to his holster.

"Hold it, Farley," he shouted. "You go crowding yore luck any more today, I aim to make you hard to find. I heard all the conversation, and if the gal wants to change her mind, it's a woman's privilege."

Idaho Cawley strolled up beside Tie-Fast; strolled slowly away again. Farley was facing the cowboy with his hand at the edge of his vest. Tie-Fast smiled and patted the gun on his leg.

"This is only Friday, Farley," he said clearly. "Just make a reach for that hide-out if you still feel lucky."

Farley glanced down at the long-barreled gun now riding on the Texan's right leg. Then he bit his lower lip and dropped his hand from his vest. Turned to Timber Cronk with a scowl of rage on his face.

"I'll see you at the office, Cronk. You are through as far as the Farley Lumber Company is concerned!"

"There's a job on the C Cross C at the same pay," Tie-Fast said quickly. "Glad to have a square shooter like you, Timber."

Martha Farley stepped up and laid her hand on the constable's arm. "I want you to stay and work for me, Timber Cronk," she said clearly. "Mister Farley is leaving the company on the first of the month. Will you stay?"

"Yes'm," the big man said quietly, and then turned to Oak Farley. "You heard Miss Marthy, and what she says goes. You stir up any more trouble around here, I aim to make you answer to me personal!"

Oak Farley snarled a curse and bolted down the street. Timber Cronk tipped his hat and took Corb Jason's arm to walk down to the jail. Tie-Fast swallowed and tipped his hat.

"*Adios,* ma'am," he mumbled, and started to follow the two constables.

"Tie-Fast! Just a minute, please!"

"Yes'm."

"You kept your word about not starting anything with Oak Farley, but I could see that terrible promise in the back of your eyes. Like a savage animal waiting to tear its enemy apart."

The Texan shifted uncomfortably and averted his face. Rubbed the toe of his boot in the dirt until he dug a hole, and then filled it up with the side of his foot.

"Tie-Fast!"

"Yes'm."

"Look at me!"

"Reckon I'll be going now, Miss Marthy," he answered hoarsely. "I got lots of work to do that ain't been finished yet."

"You mean—you mean that promise you made up on the ridge back there in the Seven Sisters?"

"Got some shippers to look after," he muttered, and kept his face turned away. "And my saddle needs a new fender where I ripped it some in the brush."

"You haven't answered me."

"Well, ma'am, begging yore pardon, but you see I ain't working for you."

"Then you are going to keep the promise you made to old Charley Condon?"

Blue eyes widened when the cowboy looked her full in the face. "Why, of course, ma'am," he blurted. "You ever hear of a Texan breaking his word?"

"But Oak had a fair trial, and he was acquitted," the girl pleaded.

"He was acquitted because of that there unwritten law," the cowboy answered sharply. "He was acquitted because them jacks was all working for him, and because them cowboys all wanted to see him in the clear where he would have to fight like a man. I shore aims to keep that promise, Miss Marthy."

"You really think he shot your uncle?"

"You was there when old Charley cashed," the cowboy answered, and now his voice was low and harsh. "He was dying, and he knew it. What do you think?"

Martha Farley closed her eyes as the scene on the mountain flashed back through her mind. She had known old Charley

Condon nearly all her life; had never known him to lie.

"He said he saw Oak shoot Timber; said Oak shot him before he could turn around," she whispered hoarsely.

"Shot him down like a yellow dog," the cowboy muttered bitterly.

The girl reached out and gripped his arm. "I think he is mad," she said slowly. "And you made a promise. Good luck, cowboy. Will you make me a promise now?"

Tie-Fast shifted uncomfortably. "I dunno, ma'am," he answered miserably. "I dunno as I better."

"Come and see me when you have kept your promise," she whispered. Then she left him and raced down the street.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

The Farley home was the show-place of High Rock. Old Jim Farley had built it facing the C Cross C. The Devil river separated the two home places; the Devil river and the deep canyon through which it brawled. Martha Farley had been born in the old frame house standing high on the mountain mesa, and she stared wistfully from her window at the lights in the ranch house across the canyon.

She could hear Oak Farley pacing the floor in the big living room below. At first his manners had been courteous, but power and greed had brought the primitive character of the man to the surface.

"Martha! I want to talk to you. Come downstairs!"

The girl trembled and closed her eyes. Then she opened a drawer in her dresser and slipped a small revolver in the band of her riding breeches. Head high, she walked down the stairs for a final showdown with her former manager.

Oak Farley was standing before the fireplace with legs spread wide. His handsome face was swollen and bruised, and the leaping fires of anger glowed in his dark eyes. His full lips were twisted into a sneer as he stared at the girl with open hostility.

"I think you better go away for a time," he said at last. "This business has to be settled, and this is no place for a girl!"

"It is you who will go away," the girl answered quietly. "We never had any trouble up here in the country until you came. We won't have any after you have gone."

"Yeah? Well, I'm not going. I am the manager here, and you are my promised wife. You will do what I say, or you will learn why I am called 'Oak'!"

The girl shuddered and turned her face away. "I've changed my mind about marrying you," she answered firmly. "I thought you were strong and fine, but you are only strong."

Oak Farley shrugged his square shoulders. "I take what I want," he boasted. "When someone gets in my way, I crush them just like that!"

"Old Charley Condon got in your way," she said quietly. "And now he is dead."

"That's right. And Tie-Fast Condon is due to follow him before long. This country is not big enough for both of us."

"You killed Charley Condon," the girl accused bitterly. "You shot him in the back, and you smiled when you were acquitted in the court room. You tried to kill Tie-Fast, and then you lied on the witness stand!"

Oak Farley smiled. "You forget the law up here in the country," he sneered. "The man who beats the law to jail is sure to be acquitted. Your Texas friend won't be any different!"

"Go!" and the girl faced him with flashing eyes and pointed to the door. "Go before I call Timber Cronk and turn you over to the law!"

Oak Farley stepped forward like a mountain cat. His left hand slapped down the gun the girl drew from her trouser band,

while his right arm circled her soft body like a band of steel. Martha Farley struggled until she was exhausted; raised her voice at last in a shout for help.

"Timber! Timber Cronk!"

A door banged open in the rear as heavy boots raced across the porch. Oak Farley threw the girl from him to face the tall constable who was coming through the double doors.

"You keep out of this, Cronk," he snarled warningly.

Timber Cronk glanced at the girl and came forward with black eyes blazing from beneath his shaggy brows. "You're through here, Farley," he growled deep in his chest. "Now you pack and get going before I take you to High Rock and throw you in jail."

Oak Farley held his left hand down at his side with his right hooked in the armhole of his vest. Timber Cronk watched those sliding fingers and slapped down for his gun. Farley snapped up his left arm and fired three times as fast as he could pull the trigger. Timber Cronk took a step forward and fell before his gun had cleared leather.

"You've killed him," she screamed. "You've killed Timber Cronk!"

Oak Farley side-stepped and tapped lightly with the barrel of his gun. Caught the girl when she fell face-forward. Then he placed the small revolver in her hand when running footsteps pounded down the hall. Stepping into the library behind the living room, he waited until the cook hurried into the room before opening the door.

"What's going on in here, Mary?" he shouted at the cook.

The woman stared at the two bodies. "Miss Martha shot him," she whispered. "There's the gun in her hand!"

Oak Farley knelt beside the girl and examined the scalp wound. "He must have attacked her," he said slowly. "Remember what you have seen, Mary."

"I'll send for Corb Jason," the woman whispered. "He ought to know about this, Mister Farley."

Farley nodded his head slowly. "That's right," he agreed. "But I am going to take her up to the camp where she will be safe. We will stand by her, Mary. Now you send one of the men down to High Rock for Corb Jason."

Picking the unconscious girl up in his arms, he walked across the long room and carried her to a big roan horse saddled and waiting at the porch. He was into the timber before the messenger started for town, with his burden held before him in the saddle.

The girl's heart was beating regularly, but she showed no other signs of life while the big horse loped swiftly through the trees. Farley forded a small stream and drew rein before a curtain of brush. He parted the branches and urged the horse into a hidden canyon; rode back a quarter of a mile where he stopped at the mouth of a small cave.

The girl jerked and struggled when Farley swung down from the saddle and lifted her to the ground. He carried her inside the cave and pushed her to a corner; struck a match and kindled a fire already prepared.

"Here we are," he said quietly. "Now perhaps you can talk sense."

The girl held her aching head and stared like a trapped animal. She shuddered when she saw the crimson on her hands; screamed hysterically until the sound of her own voice restored her to sanity. Then she became quiet, and her voice was husky when she spoke.

"You killed Timber Cronk. That's murder, Oak Farley!"

"But you were found lying on the floor with your own gun in your hand," he explained softly. "I was in the library when Mary ran into the room and found you facing Cronk with the gun in your hand."

The girl clutched at her throat while her brown eyes grew wide with horror. "You did that?" she whispered. "You did a dirty tricky thing like that to a woman?"

"I did it because I wanted you," he answered roughly. "I've always wanted you, Martha. It was the only way. You wouldn't listen to reason, and a married woman can not testify against her husband!"

"A married woman?" The girl laughed hysterically. "I'd die before I'd marry a beast like you!"

"Corb Jason is on his way from High Rock," Farley explained. "Mary will tell him what she saw, and the evidence is plain. He will start to hunt for you, and you haven't a chance to beat the law back to the jail. Think it over, Martha!"

Martha Farley thought swiftly. "If she could beat Jason back to High Rock, she would be acquitted. It would look as though she had protected herself against attack. Timber Cronk had been shot with her gun. Mary had found the gun in her hand."

"As your husband, I can testify that I heard Timber Cronk threaten you," Farley continued smoothly. "As my wife, you could not testify against your husband!"

The girl shook her head hopelessly and began to sob. "There must be a way out," she cried. "God would not let such a thing happen!"

"It has happened," Farley corrected. "We can ride down to Preacher Jenkins and get married before Corb Jason finds our trail."

"I'll stand trial," the girl declared stubbornly. "There is one man who can read that sign, and I am sure that he will."

Oak Farley shook his head confidently. "There isn't a man in the mountains who can track us here," he contradicted. "Not even in broad daylight. I found this hidden canyon last year, and no one else knows where it is."

"I was with Tie-Fast Condon when he found the body of his uncle," the girl said slowly, and her voice was cold as metal.

"That damn Texan! He started all this trouble up here, but me, I'll finish it when I finish him!"

The girl stared into the fire and ignored the interruption. Began to speak softly. "Old Charley opened his eyes and looked at Tie-Fast. Told him how you had shot Timber Cronk, and then shot him in the back before he could turn around."

"It was him or me," Oak Farley muttered. "He was reaching for his gun to kill me!"

"Uncle Charley opened his eyes and looked at Tie-Fast. Asked him to make a promise to kill you so that he could rest easy!"

"Bah! Why didn't he try that day down at the Court House? He knew I had him beat, that's why!"

"Tie-Fast promised Uncle Charley," the girl continued in a hard metallic voice. "He would have killed you that same day, but you ran like a dog. Ran back to High Rock to beat the law to jail, and then lied to save your miserable life!"

"That's the law," Farley chuckled. "I'll do the same thing when I kill the Texan. The man who beats the law to jail is bound to be acquitted in High Rock!"

The girl shook her head slowly; gazed into the fire like a seeress. "A Texan never breaks a promise to a dying friend," she repeated softly. "He is a better man than you are because he is fine and honest. He would die before he would break his word!"

"You either marry me or I will take you anyway! I will kill any man who stands in my way!"

Again the girl shook her head. "I won't marry you," she answered harshly. "You lay a hand on me again, and I will kill you, Oak Farley. Some day you will get careless, and then is when I will strike. You can beat and abuse me, but you can't make me live with a filthy beast like you!"

"So it's the Texan!"

Oak Farley got slowly to his feet and blocked the entrance to the cave. His big hands cracked at the knuckles while he stared at the girl before the fire. Then he threw back his head and laughed like a madman.

"You haven't even a knife on you," he jeered. "I searched you good while you were unconscious!"

The girl flushed to her forehead and shuddered. "You unprincipled beast. You dirty murderer!"

"Men have always killed for the women they wanted," Farley answered with a shrug. "You are in a tight spot, my dear."

The girl struggled to her feet and faced him proudly. "I have nothing to be afraid of," she said quietly. "I will surrender myself and tell just what happened!"

"But there is Mary for a witness," Farley pointed out cunningly. "No one was in the room except you and Timber Cronk. And you were found with the pistol in your hand. Timber Cronk was the law, and the facts prove that you killed him!"

"You have overlooked one important fact," the girl answered quietly, but now there was a ring of hope and courage in her throaty voice.

"I overlooked nothing. After you killed Cronk, you ran away as a further proof of guilt, and you did not try to beat the law back to the jail!"

"Timber Cronk was shot three times," the girl said thoughtfully. "When Mary entered the room, there I was with the gun in my hand, and no one else in the room."

"Right," Farley approved. "Time you were getting some sense!"

"And you were there in the next room," the girl continued. "You offer to testify that you heard Cronk threaten me?"

"That's right," Farley agreed. "Now we better ride down to Preacher Jenkins."

"Stay away from me! You have signed your own death sentence, Oak Farley!"

Farley stopped and shrugged. "Go on," he said carelessly. "Speak the bad news."

"After Timber Cronk was shot three times, and while I still had the gun in my hand, he got up and knocked me unconscious with his own gun," the girl repeated in a far away voice. "And Cronk did not even get his gun out of the holster!"

Oak Farley stiffened. "By God," he whispered hoarsely. "Now I've got to leave the country, but you're going with me. I changed our account at the bank today, and I have the money hidden in my saddle bags. You are going with me to Canada!"

TIE-FAST RIDES FOR THE LAW

Tie-Fast Condon was riding night herd on a big bunch of shippers being held on the bed ground halfway between the C Cross C and High Rock. A rider splashed through the ford; shouted with excitement when he saw the tall Texan in the moonlight.

"Timber Cronk has been killed. Miss Martha shot th' constable with her own gun!"

Tie-Fast recognized the Farley hostler; an old cowboy who looked after the riding stock. "Where's Oak Farley?" he demanded.

"He was in the library right next to th' living room. He took Miss Martha back in the hills for safe keeping!"

"Yeah? Well, you better fog it to town and notify Corb Jason. Scratch that hoss, feller!"

As the hostler raced away, Tie-Fast rode around to meet Idaho Cawley. "Look after the herd, Idaho," he said carelessly. "I'm riding back to the ranch!"

When Idaho continued his circle, the young C Cross C owner forded the creek and headed for the Farley house. He swung down at the porch and shoved through the double doors of the living room. Stared with amazement when Timber Cronk called to him in a weak voice.

"Oak Farley shot me, Texan. Reckon

you better git him the law way, now. Here's my star; I'm bleeding out fast!"

Tie-Fast took the badge and turned to the cook. "You heard what he said, Mary?"

"I heard him, mister. I knew all along that Miss Marthy didn't do that shootin'!"

"Take care of the constable. Be seeing you, Timber!"

Timber Cronk smiled wearily. "Git that curly wolf, Tie-Fast!"

Like a hound on the scent, the Texan rode through the trees. Carrying double, the tracks of the big roan were plain in the bright moonlight, and Tie-Fast Condon had learned to follow sign with the best trackers in the Panhandle.

Lush grass deadened the sounds of his approach as he rode through the canyon. He stopped abruptly and dismounted when he saw the big roan in front of the cave. Stiffened to listen when he heard Oak Farley shouting angrily. Only the last words were intelligible.

"You are going with me to Canada!"

So that was the game! Oak Farley was on the run, and was going to take Martha Farley with him. The Texan felt the constable's badge resting in his vest pocket and loosened his gun in his holster. He had made two promises; both to dying men.

Keeping close to the shadows of the brush, he ran toward the cave on the balls of his feet. Gained the entrance and slid in sideways just as Oak Farley leaped forward toward the girl in front of the fire. His voice cracked like a whip while he balanced easily on the soles of his boots.

"Yo're under arrest, Farley! Keep yore hands up!"

Oak Farley skidded to a stop and whirled around. Martha Farley shouted with a ringing note of gladness in her husky voice.

"Tie-Fast! I knew you would come!"

Oak Farley stared at the cowboy and sneered. "So I'm under arrest, eh? Being new up here, you didn't have sense enough to get your gun in your fist!"

"The law says you have to give every prisoner a chance to surrender," the Texan answered softly. "I'm giving you that chance, Farley!"

"For killing Condon or Cronk?" and Oak Farley sneered while his right hand hooked under the left side of his vest.

"Both counts," the Texan answered softly, and his blue eyes were blazing with hidden flame. "Yo're wanted for murder!"

"And you are the law," Farley sneered. "Seems like you'd be satisfied to fall into a spread like the C Cross C. Now you won't live to enjoy it!"

"Mebbe so; mebbe not," the Texan grunted. "But I'd like to hear you say it before one of us quits doing what he's doing. You shot Timber Cronk back there in the big house with Miss Marthy's gun."

"He was reaching for his cutter, and I let him have it. So what, you damn meddler?"

Tie-Fast sighed softly. "Just wanted to be sure," he grunted. "Get that hand away from yore vest!"

Oak Farley twitched his left shoulder while his right hand plunged under his arm. Like a rattler striking without warning. Tie-Fast Condon dropped his right hand and bent his knees slightly to make a sliding draw without pulling up. Dropped the hammer when the heavy Colt cradled against his hip.

Oak Farley jerked on the end of his shoulder-draw and sent a shot under his arm. He coughed when the heavy slug tore through his left breast. Buckled his knees and crashed forward when the gun fell from his nerveless fingers.

The Texan caught the bucking gun in his hand and leveled down for another shot while he watched the extended right hand inching toward the gun on the floor. Then he holstered his smoking weapon when Oak Farley twitched spasmodically and stiffened out.

"You killed him!"

"Yeah," the cowboy murmured. "Like

I promised two men who were both square shooters. We better be going, Miss."

The girl ran up to him; caught his hand in both of hers. "You saved my life," she whispered. "I won't ever forget, Tie-Fast!"

"That's all right," he growled uncomfortably. "Now I got to beat the law back to High Rock. Corb Jason will be riding up here before long."

"But you were the law this time," she argued.

"I was going to kill him anyway," the Texan admitted bluntly. "For what he did to old Charley Condon!"

"And he killed Timber Cronk with my gun," the girl whispered. "He wanted me suddenly when the girl leaned down and gripped his shoulder.

"You *are* blind, Tie-Fast," she accused. "Timber Cronk will make a wonderful manager, but the man I love does not even know it. Perhaps, some day. . . ?

Then she was gone through the canyon and across the creek before he had reached his horse. He stared after her while he high-heeled to the bay. Shook himself impatiently and swung up to the saddle.

"Who ever the jigger is, he's one lucky hombre," he muttered, and spurred through the creek. "If he ever gets his twine on that filly, he shore ought to tie fast and not dally around!"

"I Was Going To Kill Him Anyway"

to marry him so that I could not testify against him."

"Yeah? What did you tell him?"

"I told him that I would die first. I have learned to love another man, and Oak knew it."

"Like I said before, good luck to you, ma'am," the Texan muttered. "Timber Cronk was still alive when I left yore house."

"Oh, I'm so glad. Do you think he will live, Tie-Fast?"

The cowboy glanced at her and shook his head slowly. "Don't see how he can," he answered gently. "But he might have a chance with careful nursing, special if the nurse loves him."

"I'll nurse him till he gets well," the girl whispered. "Can't you see, Tie-Fast?"

"Shore I can, ma'am," he muttered. "Timber is a fine feller, an' he knows the lumber business from the ground up. Now I got to be hitting the high spots for town."

Tie-Fast stomped out the fire and led the way to the canyon where he caught up the big roan. He held the horse while the girl mounted; handed her the bridle reins with his face turned away. Stepped back

Corb Jason listened briefly while Martha Farley told him of the fight in the hidden canyon. Then he hurried out of the Farley house on the hill and hit saddle with a flying leap.

"You can't beat him to the jail, Corb," the girl called after him. "He will be waiting down there for you."

The lanky constable smiled in the darkness and spurred his horse down the trail. Pounded across the bridge and swung down in front of the jail to tie his horse beside a barrel-chested bay. Then he was in the office facing the Texan.

"I come in to give myself up according to High Rock law," and Tie-Fast Condon extended his gun to the constable by the barrel. "I killed Oak Farley like I promised old Charley."

Corb Jason knocked the gun aside with his left hand. Then he stuck out his right and gripped the Texan hard. His voice was low and friendly when he spoke.

"Giving yoreself up, hell," he drawled. "You was acting for the law tonight, Tie-Fast. Oak Farley had a killing coming, an' he was gun-bait for any man that got him under his sights. Been me I'd have

never give him a chance to get to his hide-out gun!"

"But I was keeping a promise I made to a dying man," the Texan muttered. "On top of that I promised Timber Cronk to kill Farley like a rabied lobo."

"Yeah," the constable nodded. "Timber is going to live in spite of them dinky gunshot wounds. Said to tell you not to be no more of a jackass than you could help."

Tie-Fast straightened up and searched the constable's face. "Don't know what you mean," he muttered angrily.

Tie-Fast stared hard at the constable. Studied that leathern face for a long moment to see if he could discern any hooraw-ing in those keen eyes. Then he excitedly grabbed the constable by the arm.

"You mean to say she wasn't talking about Timber Cronk?" he demanded. "She said something about the man she loved being blind as a bat, but some time he might wake up!"

"Tie-Fast me eye," the constable grunted. "You been dallyin' around ever since you hit High Rock. Be seeing you later."

The Texan leaned back against the desk and watched the constable bolt through the door. Then he walked out to his horse and took his rope from the saddle-horn.

"Tie-Fast Hombre," he muttered, and walked back in the office while his fingers built a loop. "And she said the feller she loved was blind as a bat!"

Racing hoofs coming across the bridge jerked him back to realities. His tanned face was wistful and boyish while he listened to the hoof-beats coming toward the jail. Brightened up when the horse stopped outside, and changed to a sudden look of determination.

Martha Farley came through the door just as the cowboy flipped his right hand. A small loop settled over her head and pinned her arms to her sides. The Texan was on the other end of the rope, with the end tied fast to his belt.

"Tie-Fast! You beat the law to the jail!"

The cowboy came down the rope hand over hand. Took the girl by the arms and stared into her brown eyes. Then he dropped his hands and stepped back.

"I ain't blind no more," he announced softly. "I dabbed my twine on you, and I tie fast to anything I rope. You reckon you'd be happy wearing my brand?"

The girl closed her eyes and nodded her head. "Any time you say, Tie-Fast. I've always wanted to live on a cattle ranch."

"We better be hitting out for Preacher Jenkins," and the Texan led the way to the horses. "You might change yore mind come daylight."

"C Cross C," she murmured. "What's your real name, Mister Condon?"

"Condon," and the cowboy smiled up at her. "But most folks calls me 'Tie-Fast' because I don't dally!"

PARSON WATERBURY

By
RALPH THURMAN

The parson pointed at the banker and his gunners.

No Cowtown Ever Had A Sermon Preached To It Like The One Parson Waterbury Delivered

"I'm sayin', sheriff," the mayor was saying, "this part of Texas is warmin' up like a crippled cockroach stranded in Death Valley. It won't be long till the lid flies off an' a helluva lot of souls start flappin' off to the happy hereafter. Ain't that right, Miguel?"

The fat, sleek-headed bartender flashed white teeth. "The *cucaracha,* Señor Jeff, she don' ron in the *Valle del Muerte* an' the soul she don' flap like the bozzard. Bot the co'ntry, she get pratty damn hot."

"It's worse'n you think, mayor," the sheriff grunted. "Rode out to the Double D this mornin'. Old Man Dorsey was hollerin' war like a tribe of Yaquis. 'Nother one of his punchers jest come in with a bushwhack bullet 'twixt his galluses, draggin' in the stirrup. Old Man says he'll give me till sundown to prove it wasn't who he knowed damn' well it was. Then him an' his'n was ridin'. Aimin' to string up ever' gent they ketched on Bill Anderson's Anglin' A. Not that he figgered I even might prove it, he says, an' not that he'd believe it if I do, but jest to prove he's a law-abidin', peace-adorin', easy-steppin'

hombre till his feller animals row'l him too deep."

"You proved it of course."

"Shore. Easy as ropin' a fresh born calf. . . . Jeff, my hands ain't only tied but me an' all I stand for is done up in a rained-on knot. The's a African in the wood shed an' I know who he is. But I cain't prove nothin'. I reckon you know why."

"Yeh, I know. But the'll hafta be somethin' done, Ed. We cain't afford no range war. Not enough decent folks like Anderson an' Dorsey in the country as she is, an' too many like Hardrock Ragon workin' for gents like Banker DuQueen. We shore got to do somethin', Ed. It ain't but about six hours till sundown."

Miguel set out another bottle of forty-rod. "You see thees preecher wan' see you, Señor Jeff?"

"Preacher? What preacher?"

"Jos' a preecher, señor. Hees say hees nam' ees Meenister an' hees com' from the place call' the Gospels, I'm theenk."

"That ain't his name an' habitat, Miguel. That's his perfession."

"Hees w'at, señor?"

"His perfession, dammit. His dee-vine callin'. What he does to keep from starvin'."

"You mean thees preecher hees eat the Meenister from the Gospels, señor?"

"Never mind. How did you know he was a preacher, when did he ride in an' what'd he say about seein' me?"

"Wance at the time, eef you pliz, señor. Ween he tell me hees nam', I'm say, 'You are dress' por the fun'ral, señor. W'ere at the dead wan, eh?' An' hees say, 'No, I am the preecher.' Hees com' een thees morning an' buy the dreenks. Say hees wan hol' the meetings or somet'ing. Hees use the beeg words, leave the card."

From under a bottle on the back bar Miguel produced a small calling card that bore evidence of once being white. It was hand printed with a lead pencil.

THE VERY REV. MOSES ABRAHAM
WATERBURY, EVANGELIST
'Carrying the Word to the Frontier"
FUNERALS PREACHED
$50 CASH ON COFFIN TOP

The mayor squinted at the card, frowning. Miguel looked up suddenly, said, "Here hees com' now, señor. W'at I tell you, eh?"

The man in the doorway was tall, dressed not unlike the nimble-fingered, sleeve-gunned tinhorns who sometimes drifted into Wagontrack City and sometimes drifted out. Indeed, he could have been taken for a tinhorn, except that his garb was somewhat more somnolent, lacking the usual loud-patterned vest and gold watch chain, and that his bearing was peculiarly reverent, somehow commanding immediate attention and respect.

Something else the veteran sheriff saw which perhaps went unnoticed by the other two—the set of the stranger's mouth and the eyes that looked out unblinkingly from that pious face. There was gunsmoke in the eyes, a hint of hell. But still he could be wrong. A preacher and all that. . . .

"Greetings, brethren." The stranger introduced himself, smiling. When he smiled all the reverent stateliness left him. It was a cowboy's smile. His right hand was hard and powerful. Gripping it, the sheriff and the mayor felt calluses which had not been made turning pages in a Bible or a hymn book.

Noticing the card in the mayor's hand, the Very Reverend Mr. Waterbury announced, businesslike: "I also preach the deceased out of hell for an additional fee of ten dollars. Horse thieves and sheepherders of course are fifteen dollars extra." He motioned for Miguel to fill them up. "Would you join me, brethren?"

The brotherly libation dispensed with, the Reverend without further ceremony

placed his business before the mayor. He wished, as Miguel had said, to hold the meetings.

The mayor manifested doubt. "I dunno, Rev'run." He explained the situation in Wagontrack Valley. "I admit the's a lot of souls needin' savin' in a hurry in these parts—before sundown, fact is. But beggin' yore holy forgiveness, mister, you picked a helluva time to do it."

While the town head talked the preacher had assumed again his churchly dignity and the sheriff had seen once more the smoky light in his eyes. At the mayor's last words, however, he smiled again.

"You are heartily assured of the pulpit's forgiveness, brother." His grin was broader as he reached for the bottle and drawled shockingly: "Sometimes when I cain't find the right verse in the wrong chapter, I cuss a mite my own self. What did you say the banker gent's name was?"

"DuQueen."

Neither of the two officials seemed surprised at the change in the preacher's mode of expression. They had branded him a cowboy when he came in—a little more educated than the average, but underneath the funeral suit and pious manner, a cowhand for all.

The sheriff added to the mayor's reply: "Banker Homer S. DuQueen. Owner of the Cattleman's National an' other things. Richest gent in ten counties. Personal friend of the gov'ner an' next U. S. Senator outa Texas."

"Hmmm. You ain't his campaign manager, are you?" The Rev. Mr. Waterbury's tone was sarcastic and his face showed signs of clouding again.

"It ain't bad politics to speak favor'ble of yore higher-ups, mister," the sheriff defended. " 'Specially," he added, indicating three hard-looking newcomers Miguel was serving, "in a public drinking place."

"Strictly in holy confidence, Rev'run," the mayor broke in, voice low, "me an' Ed keers for DuQueen like a high card gambler keers for the deuce of diamon's. We got a slew of reasons to suspect the gent of grave misdoin's. But we cain't arrest him on suspicion. Too much influence. We'd be laughed outa town like a gent tryin' to sell electric brandin' irons."

The Rev. Mr. Waterbury hmm'd again, shooting a quick glance at the three men at the other end of the bar. The men were eyeing him and the two officers leeringly. One of them, a sloppily dressed individual with a dirty blond beard and an unusually large nose, turned to his companions and made some remark. Part of it was lost to the preacher, but what he did catch did not flatter him at all.

He moved toward them, the high heels of his boots pounding loudly on the rough flooring. He had assumed again that ecclesiastical bearing so peculiar to him. The sheriff could not see his eyes, but in the set of the shoulders and the slow even tread, he could sense a hard and deadly purpose. Unconsciously the sheriff shivered.

The Rev. Mr. Waterbury drew up before the three. "Brother," he addressed the large-nosed one, "a lewd and uncomplimentary remark concerning me has just passed your lips, which it is the custom of my calling to overlook. However, as you have unrestrainedly aired your views upon me, I consider it my constitutional right to express myself concerning you. Brother, I do not like that scraggly growth upon your uncouth countenance, nor can I appreciate the size and shape of your olfactory organ."

Turning to his companions, Big Nose laughed loudly, showily. "Told yuh the gent was loco, wearin' them clothes in the middle uh July. Now he says I own some kind uh organ." The man laughed again, turning back to the preacher. "Hell, I ain't even got a pee-anny!"

"I was not referring, brother, to a musical instrument. I was speaking of your nose."

The leering grin froze on the other's face. "Yore bein' loco an' the sheriff bein' present is all that saves yuh, feller," he snarled. "I've kilt three-four fer not likin' my nose. Maybe yuh don't know who I am. Well, Mister Fun'ral Britches, I'm Whitey White, fastest gun in this here country, 'ceptin' maybe Hardrock Ragon—an' he ain't got my acc'racy."

"That is all very interesting. But I still do not like your nose. Oh, mayor! Is there any ordinance against a peaceably executed fistic fray in this town?"

"Not less'n yuh bust somethin', then it'll cost the loser double the damage. Ordinance number eighteen."

Nodding curtly, the Reverend spoke again to Whitey White. "Shall we do it here, brother, or shall we go outside?"

"Right here, feller. I won't have tuh pay fer nothin' *you* bust after I hit yuh. An' don't call me yore brother. I'd kill yuh fer that sooner'n nothin'." Stepping in close, the man swung from his knees, putting all his two hundred pounds behind it.

It was not until ten minutes later that Whitey White awoke to wonder how come he had missed. Something like the kick of a Texas mule had connected with his chin, his heels had left the floor and the back of his head had banged against the bar front. Miguel, with the aid of a bucket of soapy and very dirty water, awakened him. The preacher, the two officers and his two hard-bitten cronies had departed.

Whitey came up fighting, pawing at the stinging soapy water in his eyes. "Wher' in hell is he?" he yelled. "I aim tuh kill 'im!"

"He ees go, señor. Bot he leave you thees." Miguel handed him a piece of paper, evidently torn from a pocket-size notebook.

Blinking painfully, Whitey read:

IF THY NEIGHBOR SMITETH THEE ON ONE SIDE OF YOUR JAW, TURN TO HIM THE OTHER SIDE. IN YOUR CASE, THOUGH, MR. WHITE, IT WAS YOUR CHIN, WHICH YOU CANNOT TURN. BLESSED THEN MAY BE A FAST HORSE AND A SUDDEN DEPARTURE FROM THIS FAIR CITY.

Whitey swore, good and loud and long. He wadded the paper and used it to wipe some more soap out of his eyes. Then he noticed the bucket of dirty water sitting beside him, looked up suddenly at the fat grinning face of the bartender. He snarled, made a pass for his gun which wasn't there. He snarled some more, coming to his feet.

Miguel kept on grinning. There was a quart bottle in his hand which he rapped very suggestively across his other palm. Whitey didn't do what he had intended.

After having taken the guns of White and his two companions and having warned the two against further violence, the sheriff, the preacher and the mayor had proceeded to a big unpainted frame building at the approximate center of Wagontrack's main and only street. The building was a combination town hall, county courthouse and postoffice. A log annex formed the jail.

They sat now in what the mayor fondly termed his office. The cowboy grin had returned to the face of the Rev. Mr. Waterbury. He sat with his feet on the mayor's desk, puffing one of the town head's cigars.

"A regrettable affair for a man of the pulpit to indulge in, brethren. I knocked a lot of hide off my knuckles."

"Yeh," said the mayor. "That was shore a purty punch, comin' from a sky-pilot. You know, Rev'run, I'm beginnin' to git attached to you. I'll shore hate to see you go, even knowin' it's for yore own good."

"That's the way I feel about it too, Rev'run," the sheriff said.

"Go, brother? Why I ain't even held one meetin' yet." The Reverend still grinned, his eyes held quiet curiosity.

"You won't hold none in the next county if you don't git there purty soon. . . . Say, do you mean to set there an' think you kin

bust Whitey White's head agin' the bar, not killin' him, then stay in fifty miles of the gent an' still go on eatin' an' prayin' reg'lar?" Mayor Jeff Holcomb was a very shocked man.

The preacher, too, looked shocked. "Why, I think I made it clear to Brother White that he should leave town immediately."

"Much as I admire yore nerve, Rev'run, I don't think so much of yore choice of healthy habits. Whitey White, I reckon, never took advice from nobody but two men. One is Hardrock Ragon, his former cell-mate an' feller gun-greasy, and th' other'n Homer S. DuQueen, who is, me an' Ed believes, his boss—though yuh'd never git him to admit that even if you hung 'im. The banker's a society-travelin' hombre an' awful keerful of the comp'ny he keeps an' the gents he hires public."

"Ah, I begin to understand the situation, brethren. Which is all the more reason I should stay and instill the Word in the hearts of your neighbors, who even now are preparing to pillage and kill, all because of something with which neither faction had anything to do. All because one who is too mighty to touch would fain be mightier, even though his might be born in the warm red blood of his fellow men."

The Reverend was being carried away by his own oratory.

But the mayor was not. His tone was a bit sarcastic. "That's a very purty speech, Rev'run. But it ain't stoppin' the sun from slidin' towards the western ho-rizen, nor Old Man Dorsey's men from makin' hoof prints towards the Anglin' A. However, I reckon if you do stay you'll have a lot of preachin' to do come mornin', with all them dead fellers."

The Rev. Mr. Waterbury rose to his feet, carefully brushing away cigar ashes which had powdered his somber black trousers. Once again he became the man who had first entered Miguel Gomez's saloon. Once again there was hell in his eyes. Once again the sheriff shivered.

"What if I were to tell you, brother, that I was once acquainted with a man in Wyoming whose name was Homer King, whose—"

The mayor started to butt in here and say: "What if I was to tell you I oncet knowed a gent whose daddy knowed Buffalo Bill?" But something in the preacher's eyes stopped him.

"—Whose occupation was starting range wars and cleaning up what was left with a handful of mortgage papers?" the Reverend went on. "A thin, weaselish man as you have described Brother DuQueen, with black hair and black eyes and a burning desire for social and political prestige. What if I were to tell you, Brother Holcomb, that I can furnish proof that Homer DuQueen is Homer King who once served a sentence for murder?"

"I'd Say You Was Crazy, Rev'run!"

"I'd say you was crazy, Rev'run." The mayor pulled open a desk drawer and brought out a bottle and glasses. "Have a drink. Then you can start in provin' things. It's five more hours till sundown."

In a dark and highly unsociable mood, Whitey White purchased a bottle of forty-rod and left the saloon. He crossed over to the shady side of the street and made for the Cattleman's National. He was going to do something he had never done before—talk personally to Homer DuQueen about a job he was going to do. Whitey usually took his orders through Hardrock Ragon, but today Ragon was out on the range with some of the boys, practicing up with Winchesters, as Ragon had wittily explained the mission on leav-

ing the day before. They were not due back until much later that afternoon. Whitey was in no mood to wait.

As he neared the bank, a horse and rider burst from the livery on the other side of the street and roared away down the dusty road that led to Old Man Dorsey's Double D spread. He noticed the rider was a youth named Adams who often did odd jobs for Sheriff Ed Mason. He reckoned the sheriff had learned something when he had ridden off that morning and was sending the boy out to gather more news. Hardrock, he guessed, had done some practicing all right. Well, Mr. DuQueen ought to know about that anyway.

He entered the bank, walking like a man who did business there often. Nodding to the cashier, he passed on down a narrow aisle formed by the wall and the steel-barred employees' cage, drawing up shortly before a door marked, "Homer S. DuQueen, Private." He knocked.

"Come in," said a voice.

Whitey opened the door and walked in.

Homer S. DuQueen nearly jumped out of the leather-cushioned swivel chair he was occupying. His dark, swarthy face turned suddenly red with anger. He breathed deeply before howling:

"How many times have you been told never to come here?"

Whitey White let a smirk appear for an instant on his face. "Why, now I don't know as I could say offhand, Mister DuQueen. Hardrock usta tell me that three-four times a week, anyways." Whitey White was no coward. He was throwing taunts at the richest, most influential—and most dangerous—man in ten counties, and he knew it.

"Then why in God's name did you come! It better be almighty damned important, White. There are a lot of dead men right now who disobeyed my orders."

"It is, Boss. I want to know if you want the preacher feller shot or knifed?"

"What preacher, White? And why should I want him killed? Talk sense."

"Feller rode in this mornin'. Him bein' a acquaintance of yore'n I figured you'd like some say in how he was measured fer a pine box."

Whitey was making up the story as he talked. He had no knowledge that the preacher had professed knowing DuQueen. But the banker put out thousand dollar bills for killings which benefited or protected him. Whitey was going to kill the preacher anyway, so why not make it pay?

"I haven't any preacher friends, White. I told you to talk sense."

"He ain't egzackly yore friend, from what I could pick up, Boss. Didn't talk very favor'ble of you fer a fack. Told the sheriff he knowed you some'res when yore name wasn't DuQueen."

This was another shot in the dark, a shot inspired by talk Whitey had heard from Hardrock Ragon when the man who knew more than any other about DuQueen's past had been drinking too much.

The shot went home. The banker's face turned from red to a sickly grayish-white. He grabbed Whitey by the collar and shook him, though the gunman outweighed him sixty pounds.

"Where did he say he knew me? Where, damn you!"

"Why—uh—over in Aryzony some'res, I think." Whitey had not expected such a display as this from DuQueen, but was glad he had remembered those little secrets the drunken Ragon had confided in him.

If possible, DuQueen's face went a shade whiter. He turned loose of Whitey's collar, sat down weakly. He took out a spotlessly white handkerchief and mopped at the sweat that rolled from his face.

Whitey took the bottle of forty-rod from his hip pocket. "You need a drink, Boss." He pulled the cork with his teeth and passed the liquor to the banker.

DuQueen reached for it with a violently

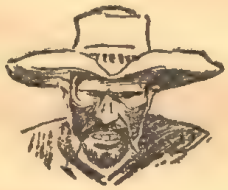
trembling hand, turned it up, downed the raw, fiery stuff in great gulps. The bottle was half empty when he set it down, gasping.

"Listen, White. I want him killed. I don't give a damn how, just so he's plenty dead. A thousand for you when the job is done. You understand? Get going."

"Okay, Boss." Whitey turned to go, then remembering reached for the bottle on the desk. DuQueen knocked his hand away, glaring though his face was still white.

"Okay agin, Boss. I kin git another'n. Don't worry about the pastor."

Whitey White was gone. He had forgotten to tell DuQueen about the horse and rider. DuQueen sat staring at the half-empty bottle. . . .



The sun was hanging a half hour high. Back in the mayor's office after having made two trips to Miguel's saloon and one to the livery stable, the preacher, the mayor and the sheriff sat talking again, discussing plans for the immediate future and estimating chances of those already carried out to be of benefit.

"Shore," the sheriff was saying, "the kid got there in time. But will Old Man Dorsey believe I'm not tryin' to run a whizzer on him, is what's got me doubtin'. . . . Not that I ain't tryin' to," he added quickly, frowning at the Rev. Mr. Waterbury.

The Reverend disregarded the insinuation. He was grinning again. "An' yo're shore our society-steppin' Mister DuQueen will attend so socially-questionable affair as a revival meetin' in a drinkin' emporium?"

"Too good a politician not to," the mayor was positive. "Might lose him some votes. Anyway, ain't you tryin' to prove he's been in worse places?"

"That's right, brother. And now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I will proceed to the scene of tonight's festivities and buy myself a drink." He smiled at the bottle and glasses openly confronting him from the mayor's desk. "I'll have to drink alone this time, brethren. Have to think up a good text to use tonight."

He walked to the door, opened it and stepped outside. Immediately his big black hat flew off as something whanged along the top of his scalp, knocking splinters from the door casing behind him. The Rev. Mr. Waterbury promptly ducked back inside, slamming the door just as two more slugs tore into it. Through the open window of the room came the bull-whip echoes of a Winchester carbine, fired three times in rapid succession.

"Didn't so much as scratch me," the Reverend answered the mute question of the two officers. Again was his face poker solemn and his eyes smoky. "Is there a rear exit, brethren? The other seems beset with complications."

"Yeh—yeh—shore!" The mayor was stammering excitedly. "Wher' was he at? They *is* a ordinance ag'in' that!"

"Somewhere at the far end of the thoroughfare. I didn't get a good look. But be not afraid, brethren. Righteousness winneth in the end and it all cometh out in the laundry." He reached the back door. "Better muster the townsmen, brethren. The services begin in thirty minutes."

He was gone as the last rays of the sun slanted in from the mountains to the west.

Fifteen minutes later a cavalcade roared into Wagontrack. In its van rode the boy Adams and Old Man Dorsey, a huge gray-haired, gray-bearded man who looked like a synonym for relentless determination. The twenty-odd riders, armed to the ears, drew rein before the courthouse building. The Old Man threw up his right arm, hollered in quite audible tones:

"Jackson! Go over to Byers' store an' git all the ammynishun he's got on hand. Rest of you boys stick to yore hawsses. I got to go in here a minute an' cuss out Ed Mason fer havin' damn fool idees. Then we'll be ridin' agin!"

He dismounted and entered the sheriff's office. He stayed about ten minutes. Then he came out and roared again:

"Git offa yore bronks, you blood-thirstin' sons! We're goin' to church. Don't set there like you cain't hear, dang you! Git offa them hawsses!"

One among the completely stunned group spurred forward truculently. "Goin' to church, are we?" he yelled. "Listen, Dorsey. The best friend I ever had is layin' dead back at the ranch with Anglin' A lead in his back. I don't know wher' you got the church idee, but fer me you kin do yore prayin' by yore lonesome. I'm smokin' Bill Anderson out from under his nightcap! How about you, boys?"

As one the cavalcade roared approval of the cowboy's words. Shouts of "On to the Anglin' A!" rose in raucous chorus.

Old Man Dorsey reached up suddenly, grabbing the truculent one by the shirt front, jerking him violently from the saddle. He stood the man on his feet, swung a hard right at his chin. The cowboy sailed headlong into the dust of the street, lay there, out like a lamp. Old Man Dorsey roared again in a voice that brooked no challenge:

"Git offa them hawsses an' git off in a rush! I said we was goin' to church—an' damn yore unsaved hides to hell, we're goin' to church!"

To a man the group dismounted. Old Man Dorsey led the way to Miguel Gomez's saloon. Somebody revived the fallen cowboy and he followed meekly.

They lit the lamps in Miguel's saloon as twilight faded and darkness descended on Wagontrack. The barroom was crowded. It had been a long time since the populace had had opportunity of attending church services. To many it was an entirely new experience. Two or three of the town's merchants were dressed for the occasion, wearing coats and black string ties and stiff starched collars. Others, the ruling majority, wore much the same impromptu raiment as Old Man Dorsey and his war party. There were no women, by request of the pastor.

Guns had been checked at the entrance, with Sheriff Ed Mason in charge of ceremonies. To each cowboy protest he offered the same irrefutable argument:

"Yo're goin' to church, cowboy. How in hell do you expect us to git any holy atmosphere in that place with you totin' enough hardware to vi'late forty commandments? C'mon, gimme them cutters."

DuQueen had been pointed out to the Rev. Mr. Waterbury by the mayor. The mayor had seemed faintly surprised when asked to do this.

"The vicissitudes of time," the Reverend had explained, "they play hell with a man's face. It's been a long time since I been in Wyoming."

"That's Hardrock Ragon in the corner from him," the mayor went on, "an' two of his pet skunks. Jest rode in a while uh-go. I reckon you know the other three gents." It was Whitey White and his two friends. Whitey was looking rather perturbed. He had just finished smashing his fifty dollar rifle against a boulder because it had failed him in a crisis. Otherwise he showed no signs of unrest in the presence of the preacher.

"Brother White undeniably has intestinal fortitude," the Reverend commented. "Strange the group does not appear associated in any manner with Brother DuQueen."

"They ain't. Not unless somethin' bad busts. Then you'll see."

Nodding, the Rev. Mr. Waterbury left him. With enviable dignity he marched be-

hind the bar, mounted a whisky case placed there for the purpose. He took a Bible from one pocket of the somber swallow-tail coat and placed it upon another whisky case laid on the bar top to serve as a pulpit.

"Brethren of the congregation," he said, "We are here tonight, not for the purpose of simple worship, but rather to weld in the glowing flame of brotherly love and fellow-man faith, the present and future peace and prosperity of Wagontrack Valley, the valley of all your hopes and loves and dreams of happiness. . . ."

He allowed the eyes which had caused Sheriff Ed Mason to shiver to rove idly over the crowd. They rested a moment on the still-warlike countenance of Old Man Dorsey. It had taken a lot of talking, the sheriff had said, to get the old goat into the swing of the preacher's idea.

The eyes moved on, seeking the cruel black ones of Homer DuQueen, finding them, boring into them. DuQueen's eyes shifted. His face, the Reverend thought, paled ever so slightly. But then the paleness was gone and the banker, except for a slight perpetual frown, showed no signs of the emotional turmoil within him.

"Before I continue with the sermon tonight," the Reverend went on in sonorous tones, "before I discuss further the blessedness of the peacemaker, I wish to elaborate upon the companionate blessedness of the cheerful giver. The congregation will now sing Hymn Sixteen while Brother Mason and Brother Holcomb pass their hats. Hymn Sixteen, friends, unless you have a book, which you undoubtedly do not, is 'The Old Rugged Cross.' In the event you are not acquainted with the words of the song, you may substitute the words of 'The Dying Cowboy' or 'Git Along Little Dogies,' just so you donate freely and in the proper quantities.

"May I be allowed to add, brethren, that the customary donations at my services are twenty-five cents for sheepherders, one dollar for cowboys, five dollars for ranch owners and merchants, twenty-five dollars for outlaws, fifty dollars for ex-convicts and one hundred dollars for bankers. All others allow their bank rolls to be their guides."

He motioned to a thin stoop-shouldered man sitting at a piano in the far corner of the room. The man, long used to the more spirited tunes of the cow country, had difficulty in remembering the sacred number, but finally after hitting several discordant notes, got into the swing of it.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of sorrow and shame. . . .

"Remember, brethren," quoth the Reverend, as the barroom burst into melody, "remember it is more blessed to give than to receive."

The cheap heel-scarred and cigarette-burned piano that had seen many better days there in Miguel Gomez's place did not in any measure rival a pipe organ, nor did the hoarse, untuneful and oft uncertainly mumbled words of the song bear resemblance to the inspired harmony of a trained church choir.

They sang, the Reverend leading in a surprisingly melodious voice, the only such in the entire gathering. The sheriff and the mayor passed among them, holding their headgear to receive the offerings. Men dug into pockets. Donations ranged from a dollar up, no one wishing to be classed as a sheepherder. Old Man Dorsey, knowing the majority of his men wouldn't be having the change, produced a checkbook and stubby pencil and wrote out a check for thirty dollars. Homer S. DuQueen, trying to smile for political reasons, took a hundred-dollar bill from a fat wallet, placing it with a flourish in the mayor's hat.

The song ended. The sheriff and the mayor marched up and poured the donations into the preacher's own hat, which lay on the bar alongside the "pulpit."

Unschooled in church etiquette, the congregation was not overly shocked when the Reverend proceeded to count the money.

"Hundred and seventy-six dollars even," he announced, smiling. "Brethren of the congregation, your generosity warms my heart. Your offerings will aid immensely in carrying me and the Word to other fields where we are needed.

"However," he shook his head sadly, "it grieves me to state that I cannot accept several of the donations because they were neither cheerfully nor honestly extended. You will remember, gentlemen, that I asked all outlaws to donate twenty-five dollars and all ex-convicts to give fifty dollars. Unfortunately, I perceive by the amount received, that this was not done. If the gentlemen who have shown themselves to be so miserly will kindly step forward, I will cheerfully return the amount of their offerings." His eyes dwelt on Hardrock Ragon and his cronies.

The face of Ragon reddened and he frowned. But he did not step forward. Neither did any of his riders.

"Brother Mason, would you be so good as to hand these to Brother Ragon and his friends?" The Reverend was sneering faintly as he picked up a handful of bills and extended them to the sheriff.

"Shore, Rev'run." The sheriff took the money, began elbowing his way back to the hard-bitten six. He was at ease; his gun had not been checked.

It was an insult which Hardrock Ragon, with his reputation, could not ignore. His face was crimson now, his little rat-like eyes blazed with hatred. The crowd scattered, opening a lane from the pulpit to the corner where the outlaw stood. Ragon's guns, they knew, had been taken at the entrance, but he might have a hide-out. He was in a killing mood.

The sheriff reached the gunman, extended the money, grinning. "You divide it amongst yore friends like—"

He got no farther. Ragon clutched suddenly at the hand holding the money. He wrenched the sheriff to him, grabbed for the gun at the officer's hip. He got it, shoved the sheriff to one side, covering the crowd with the six-shooter.

The man had gone suddenly insane with rage and indignation. He pointed the gun at the preacher, mouthing oaths.

"Brethren uh the cawngregashun," he mocked the preacher's sonorous tones, "I ain't here tuhnight fer simple worship. Not me. I'm here tuh shoot hell out'n a smart-aleckin', donation-askin', psa'm-singin', pussy-footin' sky-preacher!"

Ragon turned his head to see if his companions appreciated his wit. Then he faced the preacher again, exhibiting yellowed teeth in an evil grin.

Suddenly the grin was gone, wiped out completely. Peeping over the edge of the whisky case that served as a pulpit, two little blue-rimmed eyes stared at him mockingly—the muzzles of twin .45's. Above them two other eyes, the coldest, deadliest orbs Hardrock Ragon ever looked into, bored into his very soul.

Hardrock Ragon, killer, renegade, knew the meaning of that light flickering in the preacher's eyes. Sudden panic encompassed him. He flipped up the muzzle of the sheriff's gun, firing wildly, insanely, one of his slugs fanning the pages of the open Bible on the whisky case, another knocking the Reverend's hat from the bar.

That was the way he died. The left corner of the Reverend's mouth twitched slightly as he let the hammer drop on the left-hand gun. The third button on Ragon's shirt disappeared. He sagged horribly, his useless six-shooter blasting holes in the pine floor.

Shoving his guns back beneath the swallow-tail coat from whence they had so magically appeared, the Reverend was at the dying man's side in an instant.

"Quick, Miguel. Show the way to the back room. He needs air badly. Perhaps we will have time to save his soul."

Miguel sprang forward. "Thees way, señor."

The Reverend gathered the heavy outlaw in his arms, carried him like a child to the back room. Admitting only the sheriff, Miguel, and a little gray-bearded man who professed to be a doctor, he closed the door of the tiny room against the jostling, excited crowd.

Laying Ragon on the cot where Miguel did his sleeping, the Reverend shook his head sadly. "They was no use of you comin' in here, Doc," he said. "The gent is deader than David's cows."

On and on in flowing phrases the Reverend talked, lying cheerfully, unconcernedly. Now and then the sheriff would nod in loyal support of his story.

Long before he finished the speech, before he began mentioning names, Homer S. DuQueen slipped out of the saloon and headed for his Cattleman's National. Two minutes more and Whitey White and four friends of his withdrew. They headed for the livery stable.

Another minute of the Reverend's preaching and the mayor, too, decided to leave. He went to his office and procured a .30-30 carbine. From the office window he could watch all exits from the town. He sat on the sill and waited.

"Take Down The Pulpit And Fill 'Em Up"

The doctor put his ear to the outlaw's heart, nodded assent.

The sheriff said: "Might as well tell 'em the glad tidin's. They're shore howlin' like they wanta hear 'em." He walked to the door, made to turn the knob.

The Rev. Mr. Waterbury grabbed his arm. "Wait. We ain't had time to save the gent's soul yet, brother."

The sheriff looked puzzled, then grinned. "I git you, parson."

Ten minutes the impatient crowd waited at the door of the little back room. Then the Reverend opened the door and stepped out. The crowd roared questions.

"Brethren of the congregation," the Reverend held up his hand for silence, "be not alarmed. Our late friend has departed this vale of tears, but before he left, he repented. Yea, brethren, he confessed in full, laid bare his sins at the altar of holy forgiveness. I am sorry to say, too, he implicated several other of our townsmen, one of them highly respected, as participants in his sins, which ranged from petty skullduggery to robbery and murder. . . ."

The clear crack of the rifle five minutes later put a period at the end of one of the Rev. Mr. Waterbury's long and highly descriptive sentences. The Reverend kept on talking. The crowd stayed. Interested though they were in the rifle report, they were still more interested in the Reverend's story, slightly spellbound by his oratory.

In a little while the mayor came in, escorting Homer S. DuQueen at the end of the .30-30. DuQueen, his face drawn with pain, was gripping his right shoulder where blood stained his coat.

The mayor tossed a leather satchel to the sheriff. It was stuffed with currency.

"It shore is funny to me," he commented drily, "why the richest man in ten counties wants to rob his own bank, then fork a bronk and hit the road for Mexico. The road to Mexico 'pears to be right pop'lar today, though. Seen five other fellers ridin' hell-fer-leather thataway jest afore the banker started out. Let the other gents ride on, but not Mister DuQueen. I'd have been a helluva mayor to let Mexico claim our leadin' citizen, now, wouldn't I?"

The Rev. Mr. Waterbury agreed he would. DuQueen did not speak for some minutes. He did not seem to feel the pain of his shattered shoulder now. He was staring ahead of him at nothing, as if watching his cunningly designed air castles crumbling before him.

Suddenly he lifted his head, dazedly. For a long moment he looked at the preacher. Then he said: "I don't know you. Never saw you before. You don't know me."

"That's right, brother. I never saw you before tonight. You ain't the gent I figgered." The Reverend grinned broadly.

"What!" the sheriff howled. "Why, you said—well, I'll be dad-damned!"

"Sir!" admonished the Reverend. "An' in church, at that. Hey, Miguel! Take down the pulpit an' fill 'em up. The ministry is buyin'."

Sheriff Ed Mason sat in his office reading a telegram from the sheriff of the adjoining county. The Rev. Mr. Waterbury had been gone three days. Across from the sheriff sat Mayor Jeff Holcomb. The station agent stood waiting for an answer to the message.

The telegram gave instructions to arrest and hold one "Homer King, age about twenty-five, weight one-ninety, height six feet. . . . Has dozen aliases, usually full of Biblical names. Often poses and dresses as preacher. Known in some sections as the Gun Preacher. Not believed, however, to be religious. Educated. Has peculiar habit of changing from cowboy vernacular to polished English. Known to be glib and convincing liar. Wanted for numerous killings and getting money under false pretense. Exercise caution in apprehension. Has killed man for asking him who Lot's wife was."

The sheriff raised his head and said he'd be dad-damned.

"Any answer, sheriff?" the agent asked.

"Yeah. Take this . . . Sheriff Albright: Man you mention passed through here three days ago. Killed another man and got him some more money under false pretense. Was heading west. Better notify other counties." He paused. "How many words is that?"

The agent counted. "Twenty-eight, sheriff."

The sheriff shook his head. "Don't send it. County cain't afford it, what with DuQueen's trial comin' up. Tear it up an' take this un . . . 'Sheriff Albright: Will keep my eyes peeled.'"

Pocketing the message, the agent departed.

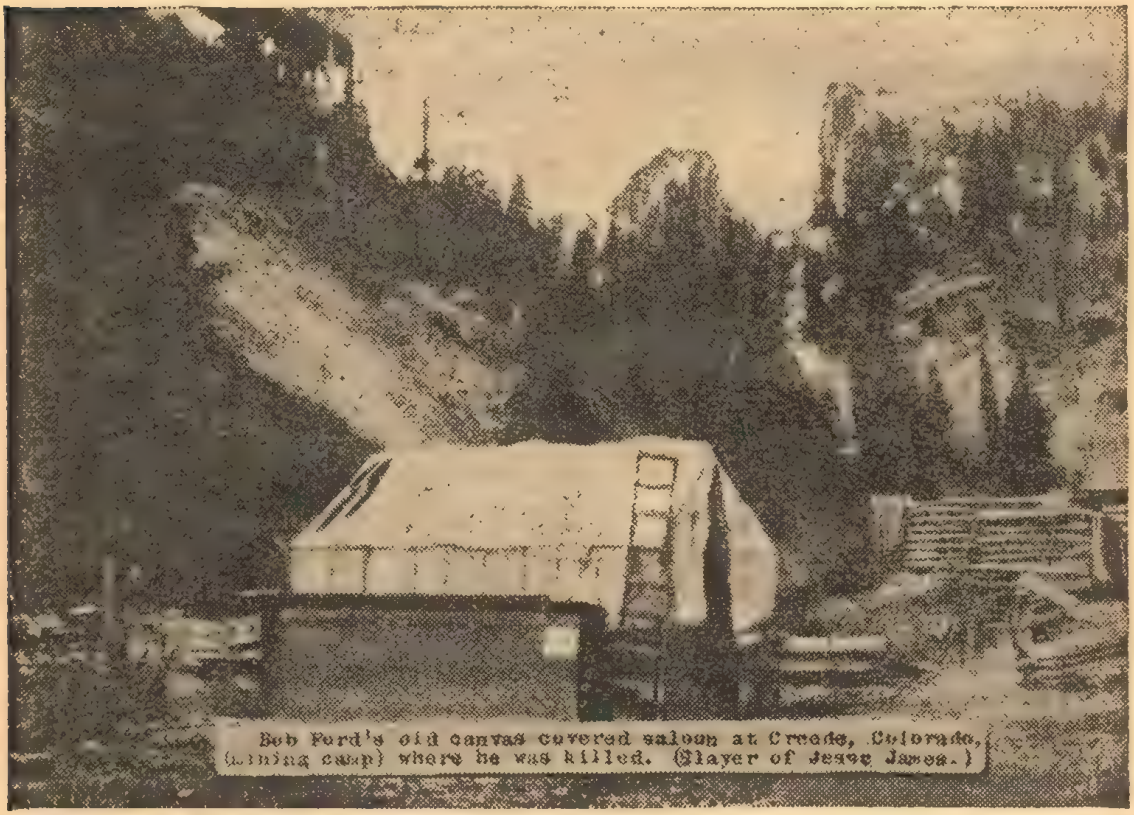
"You know, sheriff," the mayor spoke through a cloud of cigar smoke, "this part of Texas is shore a-dyin' fast. 'Bout as excitin' as a four-hunderd-pound squaw with a dozen kids an' a case of fleas."

KING OF THE BUSCADEROS

by BILL STILES

LAST SURVIVOR OF THE JAMES GANG

AS TOLD TO ED EARL REPP



Bob Ford's old canvas saloon at Creede, Colorado, where the slayer of Jesse James was himself killed by Kelly.

King Of The Buscaderos Was The Title Given To Dick Liddil When He Was With Jesse James. In This True Saga Of Spilled Blood And Owl Hoot Treachery We Offer You A View Of Him Through The Eyes Of Bill Stiles Who Faced His Blades And Lived To Tell The Tale

Of all the old time outlaws and desperadoes with whom I closely associated during the five years I spent with Jesse and Frank James as a member of their hard-riding band, none were more dangerous, hated and feared than Dick Liddil who was known everywhere as "Dick-the-Knifer" and sometimes called the King of the Buscaderos.

Dick Liddil was unquestionably the most blood-thirsty desperado I ever encountered in my entire career as an outlaw. He is

the one man who stands out most vividly in my memory because the only Bowie knives I ever had to face were in his murderous hands. I bear the scars to this day to remind me of the time we fought in St. Joe, Missouri, not long after we made our raid on the Chicago and Alton train at Glendale, October 7th, 1879.

It is not generally known, but it was Dick Liddil who engineered the downfall of Jesse James. Of course, Bob Ford killed Jesse on April 3rd, 1882, in St. Josephs. But it was Dick Liddil's treachery that brought on his death. But let us have a look at Dick's career before we go into that.

As far as I can recollect, Liddil had been a Jackson County, Missouri, cowboy before he joined up with us in the James Gang. He was born sometime in the late '40's. Just when, I never knew or have forgotten. But he was a couple of years my senior and I was born in 1850.

He embarked early on his career as a buscadero. As a lad he was one of those tough young hellions who thought no more of carving up a playmate in a street-corner fight than he did of eating. He learned the bloody art of the buscadero with a jack-knife and a fight with him meant a good slicing for any lad brave enough to tear into him.

He was the Peck's Bad Boy of Jackson County and he grew up to be even worse. At length he replaced his jack-knife with a handier Bowie. Then he began learning how to throw it. He developed a perfect eye for distance as well as a certain deft twist of his wrist that injected terrific power behind his throws. With that power he could drive a ten-inch blade clear to the hilt in a man's body. I've seen him do it!

His targets at first were pieces of paper stuck to a gunny sack filled with hay. At from twenty to thirty paces he was deadly and usually faster in unlimbering a knife than most men were with their guns. He stuck the small pieces of paper at the left side of the sack at about where a man's heart should be. His accuracy became perfect and he never missed. When in a fight he always aimed at the same spot on a man.

My first days in his company were friendly and he explained to me several of his tricks. By this time he carried blades concealed all over his body. There was one hidden in a leather sheath down the back of his neck between his shoulder blades. In each boot he had one. Up his right sleeve, attached to a rubber band, he carried another. It was a double-edged stiletto as sharp as a razor, with which he slashed coming and going. This one had a heavy, leaded handle so that a quick downward thrust of his hand would drop it into his palm.

His throwing blades were revelations. Up until then I'd never seen any like them. The one he wore down his neck was his best throwing blade. It had a light wooden handle scarcely large enough to be gripped comfortably. The blade was slender and thick. Its middle had been ground out and in the oblong hole he had pounded lead to within an inch or so of the sharp point. When thrown, this blade sped through the air like an arrow and did not spin. The lead carried the point forward in flight and when it struck it went in to the handle!

I reckon Liddil was the king of the buscaderos, all right. To him it was an art. He loved it and was always practicing his throwing when we were in camp. I spent a year or so down along the Rio Grande after Jesse was killed. That's where the buscaderos reigned supreme. The Mexicans were knife-artists, but I doubt if any of the ones I saw in action could have held a candle to Dick Liddil.

Dick was quite a gunman, too. He always carried a hogleg like the rest of us. But it was only a blind to hide his real artistry with the knife. It was his contention that a knife was more effective at

close quarters than a gun. Perhaps it was in some cases. I never used a knife and cannot present an argument there. But Liddil had it all figured that if he was ever caught in a corner and his gun taken away from him, he still had his blades to fall back on.

Frequently Dick Liddil's name has been confused with that of Little Dick West who was a member of both the Bill Doolin and Al Jennings gangs in Oklahoma. I knew Little Dick, too, and he was a native of Texas. I'd met him at Denton, but do not know the date of his birth. If my memory is right, he was finally cornered on a farm near Guthrie, Oklahoma, by Marshals Bill Tilghman and Heck Thomas who killed him early in April of 1898.

BILL RYAN

Bill Ryan, alias Tom Hill, train robber and one-time member of the James Gang. He was sentenced to twenty-five years, but paroled by Governor T. T. Crittendon, April 15, 1884.

Dick's real name was Liddil and not Little as he is sometimes called. He was not a big man. On the contrary, he was short and stocky and he did look a bit like Little Dick West in some respects. His first real brush with the law came when he rustled a bunch of cattle in Jackson and sold them to unscrupulous buyers in town. The sheriff got on his tail and to escape, he stole a fast horse. That cooked his goose as far as Jackson was concerned.

To steal cattle was considered only a minor offense in those days. But to steal a horse was a cat of a different breed and color. That crime demanded quick retribution on the end of a rope. So with the sheriff and a lynching party not more than one jump behind him, he high-tailed out of the county for parts unknown.

As near as I can remember, he joined our gang a few months before we staged our Glendale raid in 1879. I think he came in with Bill Ryan, Wood Hite and several others. Written history does not give all the names with us on that raid and I will do so for perhaps the first time.

There were the leaders, Jesse and Frank James, myself, Jim Cummings, Ed Miller, Bassham, Liddil, Ryan, Hite and one other man whose name I will not give so that I might spare his surviving family the embarrassment of notoriety. We'll refer to him as Old Dad.

I only bring this raid up again to lead to my first real view of Dick Liddil in action. It came the night following that robbery and Old Dad was the target for Liddil's hot-headed fury.

The Glendale hold-up was pulled off without a hitch. Immediately thereafter we pulled out and rode hard, never stopping for some ten hours. About a hundred miles from Glendale we made camp. It was there that Liddil swung on Old Dad.

It seems that during the raid, Old Dad whirled his horse and collided with Liddil's. Dick was a fiery-tempered cuss and took the accident to be of deliberate intent. To him, such accidents simply did not happen without a motive behind them. All during the getaway he was furious and I expected him to either knife or shoot Old Dad in the back.

But he waited until we made camp. Then he leaped for Old Dad with murder in his eyes. Before anyone could stop him, he had drawn his stiletto.

"Take it, damn yuh, an' go to hell on it!" he snarled, striking like a rattler.

Taken by surprise, Old Dad didn't have a chance to get at his gun before Liddil's blade burned across his chest. But by instinct he twisted his body around just in time to save his heart from being pierced. That was all that saved his life.

The rest of us were dumfounded by Dick's furious attack. Old Dad ducked with blood streaming over him. He tried to get at his gun, but Liddil leaped close, spun him around and laid his back open. Like a butcher he slashed and jabbed. Half dazed with agony, Old Dad finally got out his .44. Almost blinded by pain he saw Liddil poised over him to finish him off. Desperately he tipped up his gun and fired.

The bullet grazed Liddil's left temple. The knifer straightened abruptly, dropped his bloody knife and reeled away. But quickly he recovered from the shock of the slug and whirled again, hauling out the knife hidden down his neck. Old Dad was reeling, ready to faint from pain and loss of blood.

Before Liddil could hurl his sticker, Jesse, who was standing within arm's length of him, suddenly whipped out his gun and clubbed him across the skull, knocking him out. Liddil went out like a light. Old Dad fainted. We transported the two of them to the nearest veterinary establishment in a little hamlet not far distant. The horse doctor patched them up, sewing their wounds with cat-gut.

That was the first time I had seen Liddil on a butchering spree. But it was not the last. His next victim that I know of was to be Bill Stiles himself and it is a mystery that he did not kill me.

It happened along in 1881. We were carousing in a saloon and gambling joint conducted by a man named Williams in St. Joe. We all had plenty of money. After the Glendale raid the leaders had given us each $1,000 as our individual share. This, combined with the loot of several inconsequential holdups, made us flush and as we had been hiding in the country for some time to elude the Pinkerton's who were hard after us, we cut loose when we landed in St. Joe.

The whole gang of us with the exception of Jesse and Frank were in the saloon when Liddil got nasty in his liquor and singled me out for some imaginary offense. Just how it all started I cannot remember clearly. But the first thing I knew a general fight was in progress and my antagonist was Dick Liddil. It all seems hazy in my memory and if I am correct, Liddil started it by giving me a shove, a favorite trick of his before unlimbering his knife. The shove always threw the victim off balance, giving Dick a chance to draw first.

He knew I had not liked him after his working-over of Old Dad. None of us did, for that matter, and from that time on he had no close cronies among us, except for Wood Hite who feared him more than anything else.

Anyway, when Liddil started for me, my friends started for him. Somebody immediately shot out the lights and before we knew it, it was every man for himself. Friend was fighting friend and it was root-hog or die.

In the flash of pistols I saw that my opponent was Liddil. He was swearing that he intended to kill me and I knew that he would if he got the chance. My guns were out and ready to drop him when a man's body was hurled against me. At that instant, Liddil leaped at me. I felt the sharp sting of his stiletto burn across my arm. The shock made me drop my left hand gun. For a moment I was blinded with pain. And then Liddil slashed again. His blade swept across my left wrist. Something wet spurted up into my face and I knew it was blood.

I whipped up my right gun and fired. But I couldn't see Dick now. Somebody else got it. I don't know who. And then Liddil flung my arm aside. Once again his stiletto sliced into me. I threw up my arms and grappled with him. Somehow my fingers came into contact with the blade and received some painful butchering.

Only Providence saved me from being killed. I was blood from head to foot and so were several others of the gang. It seems that after the lights went out, Dick swung his blade on everybody around him, with me as his main target.

But suddenly I discovered that he was not slashing at me any more. I was reeling with pain when the lights went on again and a couple of husky bouncers jumped into the fight with wagonwheel spokes. In the light I saw Liddil lying on the floor, his bloody knife still in his hand. But blood was gushing from his scalp. Somebody had gun-whipped him just in time to save my life. I'd sure like to know who it was so I could thank him!

My wounds were doctored up with raw whiskey. I was badly cut, all right, but not seriously. No arteries had been slashed, but many veins were severed. No sooner had they patched us up when somebody rushed in with the news that the sheriff and a posse were coming to take us in. The whole gang of us vamosed quick and headed out of town.

By pre-arrangement we met Jesse and Frank in a camp a few miles from St. Joe. It was in the timber. We loafed around and recovered from our wounds. Then on July 15th, 1881, we proceeded to East Winston to make the holdup of the Chicago and Rock Island train. This was in Davies County. Liddil was with us here. None of us trusted him and I hated him for the carving up he had handed to me in St. Joe. With the exception of Wood Hite, we all avoided him, seldom speaking. He grew surly and resented our unfriendliness toward him. He also showed his hatred for Jesse for the gun-whipping he had given him just after the Glendale raid.

Something went wrong during the Winston job and Jesse killed Westfall, the conductor of the train. Just why, we never learned, but we suspected that Westfall was a Pinkerton in disguise. Another man was also killed here. He may have been a Pinkerton, too. Only the leaders knew and they were not very communicative with us in those days.

The law had them on the run now. Big rewards were being offered everywhere for our apprehension dead or alive. They say there was a price of $50,000 on the heads of Frank and Jesse. I don't doubt it. There was a reward of $10,000 up in Missouri alone for each one of us.

Pinkertons were swarming everywhere trying to collect. Jesse began to suspect that there was a traitor among us, for the law was hounding us too close not to have been tipped off to our hiding places. Sheriff Jim Timberlake of Clay County, Missouri, was one of the most persistent of the officers after us. He gave us no rest.

With the big rewards out now, some of

our best friends began plotting with an eye to becoming suddenly rich. We found that we could no longer trust anyone. Liddil least of all. It was Liddil, the cheap tinhorn, who was tipping off Timberlake to our hiding places! There is no doubt of that in my mind and history proves that he was our final undoing to save his own neck.

Anyway, in spite of all obstacles we planned and staged the Blue Cut holdup in Jackson County on September 7th, 1881. None of us knew it then, except perhaps Dick Liddil, but that was the last job to be pulled by the James Gang.

Immediately thereafter the gang split up and by pre-arrangement was to meet the leaders again later outside of St. Joe. But Jesse was not to keep that rendezvous with us. His was to be a rendezvous with death, a treacherous death, schemed and engineered by none other than Dick Liddil.

After we split, Liddil and Wood Hite paired off together. They went into hiding in the home of Mrs. Martha Bolton in Richmond, Clay County. She was a sister of the Fords, Bob and Charley, and a cousin of the James boys.

At that place Liddil and Hite quarreled over the spoils of the Blue Cut robbery. As I heard the details later, Liddil accused Hite of stealing $100 from him, and Bob Ford, who was on the scene, sided with Liddil. I was told that Liddil and Ford were scheming to rob Hite of his share of the loot and had deliberately picked a fight with him. It is likely that the story is true, for either of them would have killed a man for much less than $100!

However, the fight took place in December of 1881. Liddil shot Hite. This was the first time I ever knew Dick to use his gun for more than an ornament. He preferred, as I have already hinted, to use his blades.

After that killing, the Fords visited Jesse at his home in St. Joe. Meanwhile, Jesse had learned somehow that Liddil had been tipping off Timberlake as to the gang's activities and was threatening to go get him. Learning this, Bob Ford returned to Liddil and told of Jesse's accusations and threat.

So in fear for his life, Liddil promptly surrendered to Sheriff Timberlake on January 24th, 1882, less than a month after he killed Hite. To protect himself he made a long confession and turned State's Evidence against the gang. The news quickly leaked out to us via what is known today as the grapevine system.

Sheriff Timberlake offered him immunity if he got Jesse and Frank dead or alive. Dick jumped at the chance like a drowning man at a straw.

But he knew it would be impossible to get the Jameses alive. The only way he could get them would be by shooting them in the back. But then, that was Dick Liddil's favorite way of killing his enemies. He informed Timberlake that he thought he could enlist Bob Ford to the cause.

So Liddil was sprung with the understanding that he get Jesse promptly or hang. Quickly he sought out Ford and told him of the bargain. As expected, Bob was eager to get his fingers on some of the $50,000. So it was arranged that Bob and Charley should make another visit to Jesse's home, which they did on April 3rd, 1882. Liddil did not have the nerve to accompany them.

They were not long in coming, as everyone knows. Bob and Charley walked into the James home just in time to see Jesse, standing on a chair, hanging a picture. Seeing their chance, they took it. Bob's pistol leaped out and exploded. Jesse tumbled down to the floor and in a few moments he was dead.

In a subterfuge to protect Bob, he was arrested for murder. But it was only a sham and he was safe from assassination in

jail. They remained in jail for some time after the killing and then were pardoned.

The pardon of Liddil is proof enough that he had bargained to get Jesse in exchange for immunity. He had been wanted for every crime under the sun!

I do not know what became of him after his release. The pair of them were sprung secretly and left St. Joe as quietly. Of course, some of us hunted for them, but their trails were hidden. Once we got a tip that Liddil was hiding in Kansas City. If so, we could not find him, much as we tried. He just seemed to vanish and there appears to be nobody living who knows what became of him. We would be glad to have that information for historical purposes.

BOB FORD

A rare picture of the man who killed Jesse James. This picture is believed to have been taken just before he killed Jesse, and the gun is claimed to be the weapon he used.

As for Bob Ford, St. Joe would have been too hot for him to remain there, and he knew it. He left a faint trail down to the Rio Grande with a couple of Jesse's friends dogging his tail looking for a chance to send him to Boothill. I'm not saying I was one of them. But finally he wound up in a gold camp in Colorado called Creede.

Funny how I happened to land there at about the time he was killed, isn't it? No, I had nothing to do with his death. I was on my way to California and stopped off at Creede just long enough to see what made it tick. I learned quickly that Bob Ford was conducting a tent saloon on the edge of town and that he was having a healthy little fight on with a man named Kelly over a woman Bob was harboring.

I decided to go have a look at Bob and in consequence made sure my guns were in good working order. I'd known him well and he knew me. It would have been death for one or both of us on sight.

But once again I missed Bob by the skin of my teeth. It seems that Kelly, who was known as a James sympathizer, had the same inspirations I possessed, that Creede was not big enough for Bob and me, and had gone out a few minutes ahead of me. I had no more than reached Ford's tent saloon when from inside came the roar of a shotgun.

This was some time in 1893. But at that time Bob Ford paid for his treachery with his life. Kelly let him have both barrels, killing him instantly, presumably over the woman Bob was harboring. I doubt it, for Kelly hailed from Missouri.

SHORTY CATCHES A KITTY

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Shorty Caught A Kitty But He Couldn't Find Anyone To Help Him Let Go

Gloomy pushed back his plate and set the fire-blackened coffee pot on the stove, against the time when the overdue Shorty should arrive from Jimtown.

"That little wart orter been here before dark," he soliloquized. "Huh, there he comes now, but what the ring-tailed rannyhans is he ridin' like that for?"

Gloomy's curiosity almost made him get up and go to the door. He was still pushing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, however, when the gate to the horse corral squeaked shut. Shorty's run-over boots slithered across the dooryard, indicative of great excitement; he busted into the room like a steer breaking out of a brush heap.

"Gloomy, we're rich."

"You move and I'll shoot you!" laughed Gloomy.

"Rich, hell! How'd you figure that out? Don't we owe for this place; ain't our taxes behind like a bull's tail? Ain't the price of cows lower than a pot-bellied calf?" Gloomy punctuated each question with a derisive snort. "Rich," he added with scoffing finality, "like poor man's soup."

Shorty poured himself a cup of coffee, straddled a stool at the end of the three boards he had tacked together, to serve as a table; pushed his floppy hat back so that Gloomy could see joyous hope in his child-like blue eyes.

"I tell you we're rich," Shorty was persistent as a July green-head fly, "there's a man in Jimtown, sent here by some village they calls the Smith-and-sons Institoot, to get specimens of all our fawns. And, he'll pay us fifty bucks for a little old mangy coyote puppy. A hundred for a rock-pussy. Five hundred for a piñon kitty—even skunks is fawns too, though he'll only pay ten dollars for the hyacinth bunnies."

"What have you been drinkin'?" Gloomy demanded, "talkin' about skunks bein' baby deer and somebody payin' ten dollars for their scalps. Why, I could kill one right now out back of our chicken house—if we had a chicken house."

"Not dead!" bawled Shorty in horror, "all these here fawns has to be alive. Sound of leg and wind and, they mustn't be skun up too much, either, that's why they are worth so much."

Gloomy let the boots he had crossed on the table fall to the floor of the cabin. "Do you mean we're to quit the cow business and turn our range into a trap line?"

"Say," defended Shorty, "if you was a little brighter you'd be almost a half-wit." He spread a typewritten sheet on the table and pulled the candle over near it. "Here's the list the man gave me; it tells all about the different fawns we're to catch, and the price per fawn."

SMITHSONIAN ROCKY MOUNTAIN FAUNA EXPEDITION
Gilbert Anderson, Chief-of-Staff

Gloomy rubbed the stubble on his chin and read the description and Latin names of animals he knew as skunks, rabbits, and bear. "Well, I'll be a gill-flirted hammer-head," he reflectively ejaculated. "The idea of callin' all them poor little animals names like that. I don't blame a skunk for 'ejecting offensive secretions from his perineal glands,' like that paper says, when they call him 'Mephitis, mephites.' I'd do the same if I had the makin's. Don't mephites have something to do with religion that's back-fired?"

"Yeah, I heard a feller say once that Mephistopheles was the Sunday name for Devil, so I guess that's why the people from Smith-and-sons call a skunk 'mephites' doubled in spades. That's just a polite way of sayin' he smells like hell."

Morning saw the two friends embarked on the troubled sea of Science, equipped with nothing more potent than well tallowed rawhide ropes, and carrying gunny sacks behind their saddles. Neither of them had a gun, since Shorty insisted that shooting fauna would tend to limit the supply without bringing any profit.

Ordinarily they couldn't have ridden a mile across the Clear Creek range without seeing some little wild creature, but this bright September day the coyotes slept off the torpor of last night's feasting. The mountain lions had not yet come down from the high country around Bristol Head, and the lynx and bobcats could find food in abundance without venturing into the open, so that it was well on toward sundown when they saw their first game, a fine six-point buck, that had grazed in their upper pasture for three years, until he was almost as tame as a Jersey cow.

Gloomy and Shorty had been protecting Red Cloud, as they called him, every fall from hunters, and it was with feelings of

deep regret that they now discussed the question of capturing the big buck and selling him to the Smithsonian Expedition. Shorty took the paper from his chaps pocket and stumbled over the words—"Deer; a ruminant mammal bearing antlers. Prime specimen, male—$200.00. . . . Great care should be exercised in attempting capture; when aroused an adult deer is very dangerous."

Gloomy made a sound as near to laughter as anything Shorty had ever heard him indulge. "What! That little spindle-shanked critter with a rockin' chair on his head, dangerous?" he ridiculed. "Why, me and Toby have jerked down a thousand pounds of mad steer! If we can get close enough to put a string on him he'll bounce off the ground so high you can hog-tie him before he comes to."

"Sure, that ought to be easy," Shorty agreed. "Let's separate and ride around Red Cloud, and the one that gets nearest to him can put a string on him. This is goin' to be the easiest two hundred dollars we ever did make. But let's not hurt the poor little deer."

Already Gloomy had taken down his rope and was preparing for a cast. He started across the open park where Red Cloud was browsing on some belated strawberry plants. The buck had become accustomed to the scent of the cowboys, so that he felt no fear of them and did not run; in fact he was just a bit inclined to show temper at being interrupted.

When Gloomy was within roping distance of Red Cloud he pointed Toby straight toward the deer and swung a loop. Red Cloud gave a mighty leap, high in the air and lit running, but Shorty had circled to the left and blocked his way. Red Cloud doubled back, flirting his hind legs derisively at Shorty. Yielding to his instinct to seek cover in the forest, the buck attempted to dash past Gloomy, who made an easy pitch. The rawhide loop settled over Red Cloud's horns and snapped tight. Gloomy dallied and Toby set back. When the rope tightened Red Cloud sailed high in the air and the snap in the rope turned him a backward somersault.

Before Shorty could drop a loop on the skyward pointing legs, the buck bounced and regained his feet. Unquestionably the maddest deer ever seen on the Rio Grande. Every hair on his body stood straight up, his eyes were green with rage, and he snorted steam from his wide-spread nostrils. If ever an animal cussed men out, Red Cloud did it now.

Gloomy tightened the rope as Red Cloud started threateningly towards Toby. Shorty built another loop and flipped it in front of the buck's slowly moving hind feet. Red Cloud avoided it with nonchalant grace and with a prodigious leap landed on Toby's back, behind the saddle, from which Gloomy made a hasty exit; habitually holding tight to the rope.

Toby was one of the best cow horses in the country, but he objected to being ridden by a proddy deer, and with a bawl of terror he swallowed his head and bucked Red Cloud high in the air. The deer came down with a thump that knocked the wind out of him for a moment.

Gloomy was now afoot, holding a rope on one end of which dangled two hundred and fifty pounds of concentrated rage. "Tie onto him quick," he directed Shorty, "I can't do nothin'."

Unfortunately, China-eyes, the white pony Shorty rode, had seen what happened to Toby and he failed to respond to Shorty's spurs, but shied off to one side, keeping well away from the infuriated deer.

A sudden change came over Gloomy's attitude; he held out a conciliatory hand. "Nize li'l deer," he coaxed, "we won't hurt you."

"Phooey," snorted Red Cloud, and charged head down. Gloomy fell backwards, the buck pushed his front feet into

the cowboy's face, and his hind ones into his belly and stomped. Gloomy bawled and turned over to protect his face, but before Shorty could get a second rope on Red Cloud and half-hitch the first one to Toby's saddle horn, Red Cloud had given Gloomy such a lacing as only an angry deer can give.

Now that he was held firmly between two experienced cow-horses, who took good care not to give him any slack, Red Cloud could only twist his body and stomp his feet. Gloomy got up and walked painfully to Toby, cussing Shorty, Smith-and-sons, and whoever had thought of this idea of capturing wild animals. So far as he was concerned he was ready to call it a day, and turn Red Cloud loose. But Shorty, having suffered no bruises, was enthusiastic.

Gloomy finally agreed to go through with the play, since the buck could no longer reach either horse. And before dark Red Cloud was released in the round corral the boys used for breaking colts. It was agreed that Shorty should go to Jimtown next morning and bring the Expedition Chief out with a truck to get the prize they had captured.

After supper Gloomy got the bottle of Snow liniment they had bought in an attempt to cure a spavined horse, and insisted that Shorty rub his back with the medicine. Anyone experienced with Snow liniment knows that it must be used with discretion. Never in his life had Shorty had such an opportunity as this.

Gloomy lay face down on the bunk and gave directions to Shorty. "Now, just put a few drops on your hand and rub up on my shoulders and, be careful that none of this-here fire-water don't drain down too low."

"Sure, I'll be careful," Shorty agreed, and made a few cautious passes across Gloomy's bony shoulders. "How does that feel?" he queried.

"Not so bad," Gloomy admitted. "That deer sure worked me over to suit his own ideas, didn't he?"

"Yeah. . . . There's a little bruised spot down lower," Shorty told him, "maybe I'd better put a few drops on that."

"Well, be damned careful. That liniment is like water from the camp kettle. Lookout — whoop — HELL — godfry— damn you—Owooh!" Gloomy suddenly doubled up like a jack-knife, and left the bunk for the door that Shorty had purposely left open. Gloomy bounced across the dooryard in three long, looping springs, and sat down in the water trough. "You dad-burned cross between a Santa Fé wagon and a box stove, I'll murder you in a minute."

"He Shore Worked Me Over To Suit His Own Ideas"

"Wha' fer?" Shorty asked innocently, "I didn't do nothin' but what you told me to."

"The hell you didn't. You got that idea from turpentinein' the Widow Caples cat, and I'm goin' to break your neck as soon as the fire goes out."

Shorty saw Gloomy sizing up an aspen club lying near the woodpile, and decided to camp out until the skies cleared somewhat. He eased himself around the corner of the cabin, grabbed a saddle blanket, and took to the brush behind the cabin, where he spent the early part of the night, shaking with unholy glee. The groans and vitriolic profanity that reached his ears from the cabin did not, however, prevent him from hearing the insistent yapping of a dog farther back on the hillside.

"That's Mrs. Caples' hound-dog," he thought, "and he's got somethin' treed. Maybe it's some more fawns, and if it is I could catch 'em easy."

The more Shorty thought about it the better the idea seemed to him. He tiptoed to the stable, got his rope and a grain sack, and hiked off in the direction from which the barking came.

"By dogies," he congratulated himself, as he bow-legged his way up the slope, "this is real business. Two hundred dollars today already, and maybe a hundred more tonight. Even porcupines is fawns, only they don't bring much. Five dollars a head, the paper says, but if that pup has treed a bobcat, I'll get another hundred out of Smith-and-sons. Maybe that will make Gloomy forget what I did to him."

When he came to the open ground his hopes soared still higher. Mrs. Caples' fox-hound, Cæsar, sat at the foot of a slender aspen tree near the center of a little park and bayed lustily at a little bunch of fur near the top of the sapling. Shorty approached cautiously. Cæsar leaped about barking frantically. Not until he was directly under the animal in the sapling did Shorty fully appreciate the luck that had befallen him. He stood looking upward for fully a minute.

"Geeminety," he gasped, "a baby piñon-cat. The highest priced fawns there is. He's worth five hundred dollars, and all I have to do is put him in a sack and carry him home."

The mountain lion cub was hardly larger than a good sized house cat. He was not nearly so fearful of the man who climbed slowly up the sapling as he was of the snapping jaws of the excited dog; so that Shorty actually sat on the limb and slipped the gunnysack around the cub and pushed him into it, without receiving a scratch. He tied the sack securely and was about to slide to the ground when there came a blood-curdling shriek from the piñons, and a full grown old tabby lion came bounding toward the tree.

Cæsar's enthusiasm instantly vanished. Chasing a cub up a tree was one thing, facing that cub's angry mother, was something else; he started for home with the claws of a two hundred pounds of mad cat flailing the air just behind him. The bawls with which Cæsar had proclaimed his courage faded into yelps and whines of terror. Sounds that convinced Shorty that the hound would not come back, and that he was literally out on a limb.

Having chased the hound out of the park, the outraged mother returned at a long lope to the foot of the tree, gauged the distance to the limb, cocked her hind legs under her and shot upward like a yellow streak. Her long lance-like claws barely grazing Shorty's flesh, but ripping away ninety per cent of the seat of his overalls.

"Hi there," Shorty protested, "wait a minute, Mrs. Lion, I'll turn your baby loose. Don't take another crack at my hootnanny."

From the forest came Gloomy's voice. "You'll do nothin' of the sort. You caught a cub piñon-cat and he's half mine. I come up here to kill you, and unless you keep the cat I'll shoot."

"Come quick, Gloomy," Shorty pleaded, "put a string on this mamma-cat and I'll come down."

"How the hell am I goin' to throw a rope when I can't set square in a saddle?" Gloomy demanded. "I hope that old tabby puts the double-cross on you where it'll do the most good."

The mountain lion evidently realized the uselessness of trying to catch a man on a horse, so paid no attention to Gloomy. She circled the tree but kept looking upward at the sack, which she knew perfectly well contained her offspring. Every few seconds she would crouch for another spring, at which time Shorty began a vigorous kicking, and howled prodigiously, to all of which Gloomy looked on with frank approval. The memory of the Snow liniment applied to a sensitive spot does not soon wear out.

"Sic 'em, Tabby," he chortled. "I'm

for you, and if you can't get that bow-legged little freckle on a wart out of the tree I'll rope him and drag him down for you."

"Aw, Gloomy," Shorty protested, "you wouldn't do that. I'm sorry I put the liniment on your—"

"Never mind the apologies," Gloomy cut in. "I won't be able to sit square in a saddle for a week. If it wasn't that somebody has to do our range work until I'm able to ride, I'd shoot you now. That's what I intended to do when I caught you."

Shorty caught a gleam of hope from Gloomy's statement—at least Gloomy had a gun. "I'll tell you what, Gloomy," he proposed, "this fawn I've got in the sack is worth five hundred dollars in Jimtown; you shoot the old lion and you can have my interest in the cub. You can keep the whole five hundred for yourself."

"Nothin' stirrin'. I wouldn't help you out if I knew I could collect five thousand on it."

The old lion wanted that cub and she decided to get it by climbing up after it. Backing up a few steps she ran forward and made a mighty leap, drove her long, sharp claws into the soft wood and clung there.

Gloomy howled gleefully and rode as near as his spurs could force Toby to go. "Go to it, Kitty," he yelled, "I'm for you. Skin the rest of his pants off, he can't hurt us."

In desperation Shorty swung the sack and pitched it squarely into Gloomy's face. "Here, take the damn fawn," he yelled, "I don't need it nohow."

It had been a hard day for Toby, he had been ridden by a buck deer, forced to stand the smell of his hereditary enemy, mountain lions; and now to have to carry a sack full of smelly cub was too much. He started a job of high and fancy bucking that caused Gloomy to forget his injuries and straighten square in the saddle. He remembered about the liniment, however, the first jolt, and dropped the sack in order to ease himself away from the cantle of the saddle, and again cussed Shorty. The latter had managed to kick himself free, and dropped to the ground a fraction of a second ahead of the mother lion falling behind him.

The old lion stopped mauling Shorty and sprang for the sack, tore it open and released her child. A few seconds later the cub imitated the long leaps of his mother as it followed her out of the park, his small tail standing erect in defiance of dogs, humans and horses. At the edge of the trees he turned his head and spat derisively.

Shorty sat up trying to hold his hand over exposed parts. "There goes five hundred dollars with its tail over its back, makin' faces at us," he mourned.

Gloomy reined Toby closer and gazed gloatingly down at his defeated partner. "There's still some liniment left in the bottle," he suggested, "I'll rub it on the place the lion scratched you."

Shorty stood up, looked once more toward the place where the lion had disappeared and turned toward the cabin. Gloomy rode along behind him.

"I was goin' to tell you," he broke the news with exasperating satisfaction, "that you won't be bothered none delivering the buck. I forgot about him bein' in there and left the gate open when I went to corral the horses."

Next day Gilbert Anderson, Chief-of-Staff of the Smithsonian Expedition, received a letter delivered by a neighbor of the two cowboys.

Dear Mr. Smith-and-sons:

Me and Gloomy has decided not to catch any more fawns for you. We had some but the pore li'l things felt so bad 'bout bein' jailed that-a-way that we turned 'em all loose. I'd a come to tell you myself but our saddle horses don't like the smell of lions and they all broke out and left our ranch. We're plumb a-foot.

Yours,
Shorty.

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 14 No. 41

HORSELESS HORSE RACE

Fixing Is Charged

It looks like nobody is ever going to find out which is the fastest horse — Catamount Macy's black gelding or Choctaw Tolliver's chestnut mare. For the third time the match race between these two cayuses was postponed, for the simple reason that by 2 P.M., the time set for the race, neither one of the animals could have got around the course unless they was hauled around in a spring wagon.

About the same thing happened this time as the other two times the race was supposed to been run off. Along about sunup, Choctaw sneaked over to Catamount's barn and mixed some loco weed with the hay which Catamount's horse was eating. And while Choctaw was doing this, Catamount he was over to Choctaw's dumping a few hatfuls of Epsom Salts into the mare's watering trough.

Then a little later Choctaw got to worrying that maybe the loco weed wasn't enough to keep Catamount's horse from winning, so he sneaks over again and manages to tie a piece of cord under the hair of the gelding's feltlock. But Catamount also wanted to be double sure, so he watched his chance to shove a carpet tack into the frog of the mare's foot.

Still the two fixers wasn't satisfied, because the mare pretty quick got a sponge shoved up her nose, and turkey mullen was used for the same effect on the gelding.

By this time both cayuses was down and couldn't get up, so after much bluffing and dickering by both owners, it was agreed to call the race off.

I guess nobody was a heap surprised, because neither Choctaw nor Catamount ever got any Sunday School medals for being honest. They both

(Page 2, column 1)

VILLAGE BLACKSMITH BROKEN-HEARTED

Strong-arm Streeter, the village blacksmith, is just about broken hearted these days, account of the awful calamity which happened to him last week. Strong-arm was putting shoes on a fractious bronc when the bronc got loose and just about tore down the shop. He kicked Strong-arm a terrific wallop, which broke seven or eight ribs, then he stepped on him and busted his left arm in three or four places. By this time Strong-arm was in no mood to argue so he got on his hind legs and tried to scramble out of the way. But the bronc wasn't satisfied yet and he let loose again, breaking Strong-arm's right leg and pitching him into the fire, where he got pretty scorched up.

Well, them little injuries wasn't serious atall, as Strong-arm will recover, but nevertheless he won't ever be the same again. And he is almost heart-broke over the calamity which he discovered when he came to. The scorching he got when he was pitched into the fire completely ruined the very elegant tattoo he had on his chest.

UGLY RUMORS NOT TRUE

Local Man Irate

Hard-head Henderson wishes to deny the ugly rumor and malicious gossip which is being circulated about him. Folks are saying, you know, that Hard-head married his present wife because her uncle died and left her a lot of dinero.

Absolutely, says Hard-head, this is a false report and a dang lie, as he would have married her no matter who left her the money.

PROFESSOR GETS TECHNICAL

Local Cowhand Sets Him Straight

It took Jackass Jake to unravel a word which Professor Hoenshall sprung on the local citizens the other day. The Professor, you know, was recently instructed to send some Fauna and Flora of these parts to a museum in the East. (That Fauna and Flora business means Animals and Flowers, which is just a sample of the technical kind of words that the Professor uses to talk with.)

Well, anyways, the Professor was inquiring of everybody if they knew where he could get hold of a good taxidermist. Now of course nobody knew what the hell he meant by taxidermist, and not wanting to show their ignorance why, everybody just told the Professor no, they didn't know where he could locate a taxidermist.

Jackass Jake, however, didn't act quite so dumb as the rest of the ignoramuses around town, and when the Professor inquired of him for a taxidermist, Jackass gets diplomatic and asks casual like what does the Professor want one of same for.

"I have captured a very fine specimen of desert coyote," answers Professor Hoenshall, "and I'd like to get a professional taxidermist to fix him up before I send him East to the museum. A taxidermist, you know, is a man who mounts animals."

"Oh, you mean a sheepherder!" exclaims Jackass, as he gets wise to what the Professor was talking about. "Well, I can tell you where to find plenty of sheepherders, but I don't know if'n they'll do the coyote job for you."

"EAST LYNN"
Opera House Tonight

EDITORIAL

For a long time I been thinking that I should write an editorial in Defense of The Law. Too many of your hammerheads has got the idea that The Law in this country is still an idle rumor which was thought up by lawyer-sharks so that they wouldn't have to make an honest living. Well, such ain't so, and it is time you rannyhans learned that you can settle your grudges legally and civilized.

Take you old-timers, for instance, who still think you got to take the law into your own hands to get a fair and square deal. I'll say right off that you are plumb mistaken. The law in this country is for your own benefit and protection. When you think you been done wrong, you ought to tell the Sheriff about it, and right away he will see that justice is done to one and all.

Now, I don't mean in the matter of killings, because that is a purely private and personal matter and should be took care of by the parties concerned (or the surviving relations). But I mean in the matter of water rights and boundary disputes and etc.

Just to show you how the law works and justice is done, let me point out the case of Rhodes vs. Borel. The complaint was that one of Borel's sheepherders let a woolly stray across the Arroyo Seco, and said woolly was found drinking out'n one of the springs on Roan Rhodes's land. Now, you can see how this stinking sheep might have polluted the spring so that cattle wouldn't drink out of it, and how thousands of head of beef might have died of thirst account of one sheep being where he shouldn't.

But did Rhodes get his tail up and go gunning for sheepherders? Hell, no, he didn't! He acted plumb civilized and legal. He told the Sheriff, and the Sheriff brought Borel up before the Judge, and the Judge found Borel guilty of Property Damage and he ordered the sheepman to pay Rhodes $20,000 damages.

Now, that is just a sample of how the law works, and how a man is protected and benefited by same. I want to state, too, that the law works both ways, for sheepmen as well as for white men. The law is fair and impartial. To prove this point I'll tell you about the case of Borel vs. Rhodes. This time it was Borel the sheepman that made the complaint, so the Sheriff had to bring Rhodes up before the Judge. The charge was that Rhodes had killed ten thousand head of sheep by running them over a cliff one night. And Rhodes had to admit that the complaint was true.

Well, Rhodes proved beyond a doubt that it was a mere accident, but even then the Judge declares that the Law must take its course, with Liberty and Justice for all. He ruled that, accident or not, he would have to give Borel a judgment against Rhodes for the damage done. And Rhodes, just to show he was a good sport and a law-abiding citizen, paid Borel the $5 right then and there.

(Continued from page 1, column 1)

are so crooked that they could lay down in a rattlesnake track without bending any. Either one of them would rather make one dollar crooked than a hundred dollars honest. They both is very proud of playing smart, so I guess it is a example of the old saying, "It ain't the money, it's the principal of the thing."

Anyway, I better get my money back.

PERSONALS

Pot-gut Gould had to fire the young dude he has had working around his place. This dude has pulled lots of damfool mistakes, but Pot-gut always was patient with him, thinking that eventually the boy would commence to learn a little something. But the other morning Pot-gut told him to go out and milk the cow, and when the boy came back in he only had a few inches of milk in the bottom of the milking pail.

"Say, you better try some more," Pot-gut tells him. "You ought to get three-four gallons out'n that cow."

"Cow?" says the boy, very surprised like. "Hell, I thought you said sow!"

Pop McCoy, who is one of the regular patrons of the Cowmen's Café and Lunch Counter De Luxe, has invented a very simple test for the raising pie at the café. When in doubt, says Pop, just wave your arms and say "Shoo!" Then if nothing flies away, it is raisin pie—maybe.

—

Last Sunday Deacon Diggs didn't preach the sermon which he had all fixed to orate about. It was a mighty fine lecture, too, he says, all about the Evils of Drink and the Bad Effects of the Demon Rum. But he just wasn't up to a strenuous subject like that, as he was plumb indisposed.

Besides feeling dizzy his head ached, says the Deacon, and his tongue was dry and swole up like a steer's at a water-hole. Also his guts was afire, like he had been eating nettles. And his eyes was red and smarting just like he'd been riding drag behind a thousand beeves in a wind storm. In short, he didn't even want to *think* about the Demon Rum, much less *talk* about it.

Fast Freight

Mr. and Mrs. Sexton, the newlyweds, are announcing the birth of a daughter. The child was born in Yuma, where Mr. and Mrs. Sexton are spending their honeymoon.

FOR SALE

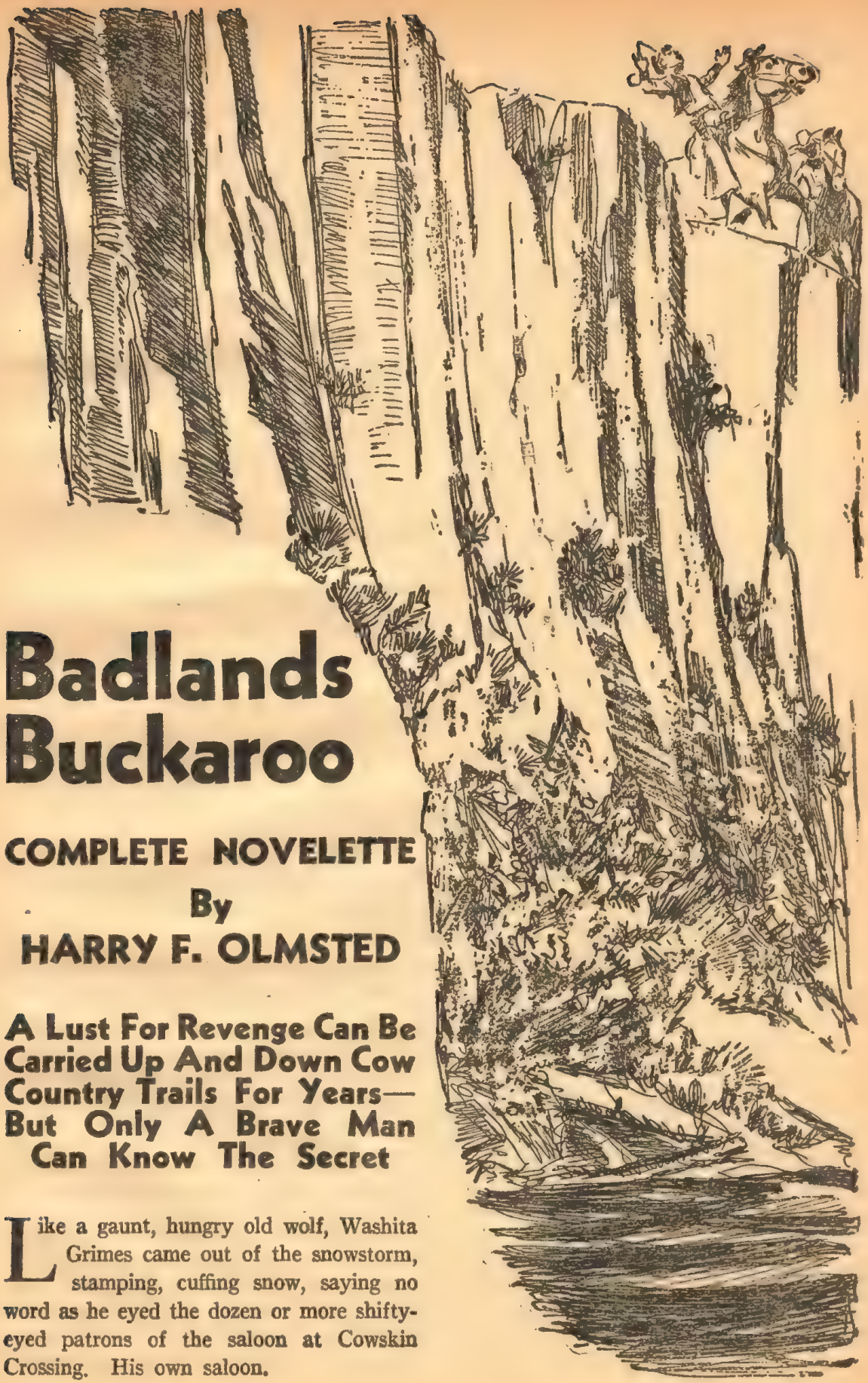
To pay for all the hay and oats which he has ate up in my livery stable, I will sell cheap one bay gelding about fourteen (and not more than nineteen) years old. He is a very fine animal excepting a few little unimportant details like spavin, saddle galls, ring bone, buck knees, pigeon toes, and a quarter crack in his right fore foot. However, he is very gentle. A bargain.

Whip-socket White.

WANT ADS

(Editor's note: This section of the Gazette is open to the public, and the rate is 10c. per line cash or 15c. per line on the cuff.)

LABOR—Post Hole and Privy Digging Done Reasonable.
DIGGER DEAN *(Cuff)*



Badlands Buckaroo

COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By

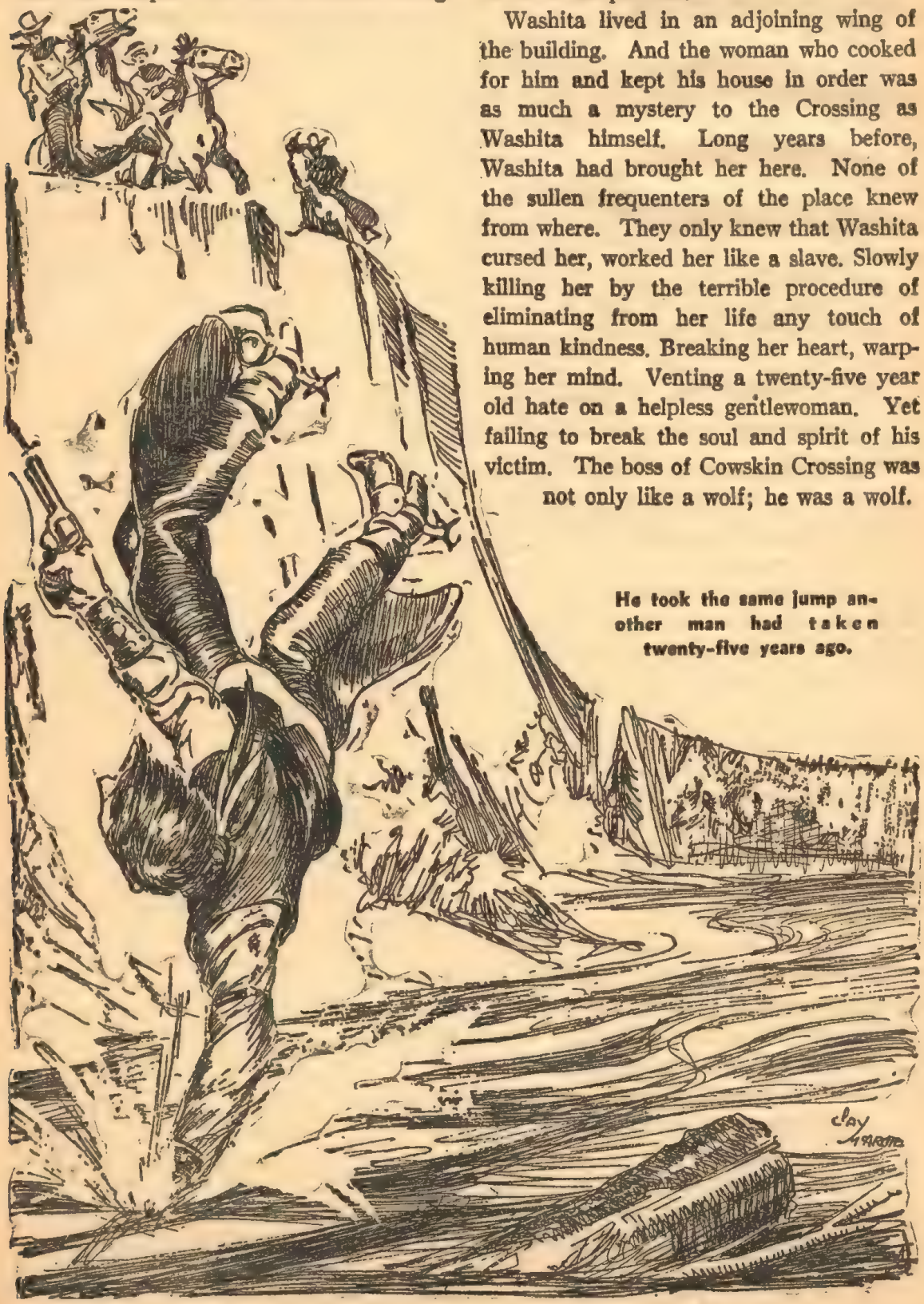
HARRY F. OLMSTED

A Lust For Revenge Can Be Carried Up And Down Cow Country Trails For Years—But Only A Brave Man Can Know The Secret

Like a gaunt, hungry old wolf, Washita Grimes came out of the snowstorm, stamping, cuffing snow, saying no word as he eyed the dozen or more shifty-eyed patrons of the saloon at Cowskin Crossing. His own saloon.

Those patrons, clustered about the red-bellied stove, looked up at his entry, but as quickly dropped their eyes. For Washita's eyes were not easy to look into. And his temper was an uncertain thing. Like frozen dynamite. Though they might have been curious as to Washita's business, ranging afield in such a storm, they were hardly surprised. They had supposed him to be in his quarters.

Washita lived in an adjoining wing of the building. And the woman who cooked for him and kept his house in order was as much a mystery to the Crossing as Washita himself. Long years before, Washita had brought her here. None of the sullen frequenters of the place knew from where. They only knew that Washita cursed her, worked her like a slave. Slowly killing her by the terrible procedure of eliminating from her life any touch of human kindness. Breaking her heart, warping her mind. Venting a twenty-five year old hate on a helpless gentlewoman. Yet failing to break the soul and spirit of his victim. The boss of Cowskin Crossing was not only like a wolf; he was a wolf.



He took the same jump another man had taken twenty-five years ago.

And now, without so much as a glance at his henchmen, Washita poured a drink, downed it and entered his living quarters, slamming the door behind him. His wolf strain showing clearer than ever before. It was said that Washita had early mortgaged his soul to the devil and then had run to the badlands to avoid payment. The inference being that the Missouri River badlands were too tough for even the devil to venture into.

Whatever it was that had driven Washita into the badlands many years before, his going had been no loss to the place that owned him. Nor had his coming added aught to the luster of those silent lands of bare gumbo ridges, bog hole sinks and blind coulees that cradle the muddy, whispering Missouri.

Washita had prospered at the Crossing. Numbered among his patrons were the rough, tough youngsters from Texas. Transient horse and rope men convoying their long-horned charges to the northern reservations. He catered by choice only to wild spirits. To chill-eyed, close-mouthed riders who came and went like grim ghosts.

Washita's place became a clearing house for the cryptic messages from off the owlhoot trail. For in three directions from his squat collection of log buildings, men with proper credentials might find dim trails leading to refuge. An outlaw heaven, a lawman's nightmare. That was Cowskin Crossing.

Not that Washita was hated by all lawmen. Not at all. The man was as wise as he was direct of action. As ruthless a schemer as might be found along the muddy river. He had foreseen the need of carefully kept fences. And not by accident were the sheriffs who treated with him better outlaws than lawmen.

Now Washita sat before the stove in his quarters, reading a letter from one such sheriff. A letter brought by a breed rider from Lewistown. It read . . .

Friend Washita:

Last time I saw you at the Crossing you mind I spoke of the Mormon Kid. I was lucky and nabbed him on Big Wolf. Then was unlucky when he sawed outa jail last night. He'll head for the Little Rockies by Cowskin or Rocky Point. I'm heading for that last and you watch your end. A thousand if you nab him. Tall, straight, dark, about twenty-two. Yores, Tate Truett, Sheriff.

A slow laugh shook the gaunt, iron-hard body of the wolf of Cowskin Crossing.

"The pilgrim!" he murmured. "Had his man an' let him saw out. I coulda told him that half these owlhooters tote saw blades in their boots to keep their laigs straight."

His mirth gave way to studious contemplation. Mormon Kid! Utah gunslick, fresh on northern ranges after fetching in a big herd of Nevada cattle, he had shown the natives something new in the game of lone-hand robbery. A stranger in a strange land. Washita hadn't seen him. None of the badlands crowd had seen him. True, Tate Truett had lodged the Kid in jail for part of a night, but . . . well, Tate could be handled. A smile grew on Washita's face as he tossed the letter in the stove. Tall, straight, dark and twenty-two. Couldn't be better.

From a cupboard close at hand, Washita took a cowhide box. From it he lifted a pearl-handled, gold-inlaid pistol. A Navy Colt's, old as models went, but bright and clean as the day it was assembled—more than twenty-five years before.

Face a mask, Washita sat down, toying with that beautiful weapon. Into his colorless eyes came haunting shadows torn from the grave. Inside him were pools of trouble, an urge that amounted almost to desperation. With a swift, trained ease, he whipped out his own gun, laid it beside that other. His own was well notched along the edge of the butt. And one of those notches stood for the man who had owned that fancy gun, who hadn't been able to jerk it loose fast enough. Tal Clayborn.

The man who, twenty-five years ago, he had sent to feed the catfish of the Big Missouri. Just a kid cheated out of the loves, the hates, the wars and experiences that go to make up life. Tal Clayborn.

And now—Washita flashed a crafty smile—it was important, nay essential, that Tal Clayborn, who had hardly loved, let alone married, have a son. A son who should now appear to play his part in the moving affairs of the badlands. And what could be finer than to have the Mormon Kid ride in to play that part? The Mormon Kid, who was tall, straight, dark and twenty-two. Just as Tal Clayborn had been tall, straight, dark and twenty-two when he had tumbled into the river, with Washita's lead under his briskit.

Washita shivered. Fire must be burnin' low. Or mebby. . . . Across his vision flashed the ghastly face of Tal Clayborn as the muddy tide of the Missouri had closed over it. His unfired gun salvaged from the bank. Twenty-five years ago. A fool, Tal. Givin' his life fer a woman who loved another too much to ever appreciate. . . .

Washita half turned his head, listening. Over the moaning of the icy blizzard wind sounded the shuffle of moccasins in the kitchen, the rattle of pans. Washita's mouth became a hard, bitter line. Very deliberately, he holstered his gun, placed the fancy weapon in its case and put it away.

"Violet!" he barked. "Hey!"

For one breathless moment, the kitchen noises ceased. Then footsteps shuffled to the door and a woman stood there. A woman crushed and bent and aged beyond her years. Scores of wrinkles lining her face. A face once radiant with a beauty that stirred men's souls. And reflecting now but little of the unquenchable spirit that had defied and held off Washita Grimes all these years. Now her deep sunk eyes were bright and gleaming. Too bright. Too gleaming. Eyes that writhed fearfully as she cringed before this boss of the outlands.

"What . . .?" she asked, in a wan, pinched voice. "What have I done now?"

He fixed her with a baleful stare. "Nothin' much, bet on that," he snarled. "Come over here!"

She shrank pitifully. Yet like a dog that cringes to its master's feet for the expected punishment, she came to him, her eyes heavy with the awful fear her years slaving for this man had laid on her soul.

"Don't," she said with spirit. "Don't lay your hands on me!"

"Shut up," he barked, cursing. "Don't holler till yo're hurt!" He caught up her painfully thin and shrunken left hand, glanced at it, cast it from him. "Where's yore ring?" he demanded. "Where's it at?"

"Ring?" she repeated, wearily, dead voiced. "What ring?"

"You know what ring," he snarled. "Where yuh hid it?"

"It's gone," she murmured vacantly. "Lost."

"Don't lie tuh me," he bawled. "Or I'll beat yuh to death. Go find it!" He rose threateningly.

Half fearfully, she recoiled from him, backing away until a corner trapped her. Washita followed with the effortless glide of the wolf as it tracks down its crippled prey. The storm wind, outside, wailed dolefully at the eaves.

"God, oh, God," prayed the woman, cowering before Washita's advance. "Don't let him take away the last thing I have. My only anchor. . . ."

"God ain't helpin' yuh," sneered Washita. "Dig up that ring!"

A dry sob shook the frail woman. She buried her face in her wasted hands.

"I'm givin' yuh three!" snapped Washita, brandishing the quirt. "One . . . two . . ."

The woman lifted writhing, pleading eyes. But she glimpsed no mercy in the wolf's black orbs. Her spirit weakened.

"Here!" she moaned, and snatched a frayed ribbon from around her neck.

Gloating, Washita snapped the ribbon, palmed the plain gold band it threaded. The woman's last tie to a dead past. Washita tossed it up, caught it, chuckling as if it were a treasure, instead of a worn and discolored ring, valueless save to the woman, who watched him with hopeless concentration.

"Now git on back to yore kitchen!" he ordered, and lifted the quirt.

She lurched away, stumbling through the doorway. Her lips were moving, but none of the pent-up hatred of twenty-five awful years passed them. Long ago she had seen its futility. The door banged shut behind her. From the kitchen came the echoes of her awful grief and the wind gods chortled about the eaves of the log saloon.

But Washita had thoughts for nothing so drab as a weeping woman or a shrieking wind as he again took his seat by the stove. He grinned contentedly as he read the simple engraving inside the plain band. "From Jeff to Violet." How perfectly it all was dovetailing. Jeff . . . Violet . . . Tal Clayborn . . . and now opportunity knocking at his door in the person of the wanted Mormon Kid. If Mormon showed, it could happen.

From his pocket, Washita pulled a folded Fort Benton paper, spread it out upon his knees. On it were glaring headlines:

NEW U. S. MARSHAL, JEFF DIXON, PROMINENT CATTLEMAN, PROMISES VIGOROUS CAMPAIGN AGAINST LAWLESS

"When trails are open," says old-time cowman, "I'll clean up Cowskin Crossing and other outlaw hideouts."

Washita roared with laughter, wadded the paper up, then smoothed it out. His actions lent an unconvincing note to his ribald mirth. Old Jeff Dixon, the man he had hated for half a lifetime. Old Jeff makin' his brags. Let him come. But the law. . . .

Here was something new, something a little terrifying to Washita. Heretofore he had recognized two kinds of lawmen—those he could proposition and those who let him strictly alone, and he them. Old Jeff Dixon fell into neither of those classes. Washita knew Jeff as one that life had treated shabbily, as a man of few words, as a man who would go through hell to discharge an obligation.

Washita read the article through for perhaps the hundredth time. Then looked again at the ring.

"Tall, straight, dark an' twenty-two," he mused. "From Jeff to Violet. I'll hang Washita Grimes or give up my star. Jeff. . . .!" His eyes grew flinty. "I'm wonderin' which it'll be . . . when I tie them loose ends into a hard knot."

His loose body shook with a silent, mirthless laugh—a sneering exhalation that was echoed by the frigid devils that rode the shrilling wind.

THE KID HITS COWSKIN

Dawn, gray as the shadow of death, broke over Cowskin Crossing. A thick, snow-deadened darkness, black as the grave, cold as a corpse, turned slowly to a wan and pallid daylight filled with spitting flurries of snow blown straight from the Arctic maw. The wind, howling down the coulees like a rampant banshee, carried the numbing kiss of death, rattled the bare limbs of the cottonwoods like dry bones.

Wrapped in overshoes, fur cap, fleece-lined mittens and buffalo coat, Washita waited at the crossing, stamping impatiently to keep his blood moving. His pale eyes, colder even than the storm, stared fixedly at the snow-banked opening across the slithering Missouri River, where countless thousands of bawling cattle had crossed on firm bottom. He was in a vile humor.

Why hadn't he fetched a bottle? Give a dollar for a drink. Ten dollars, by hell,

What good was money, outside the likker It'd buy? Washita liked likker. Why didn't that fool of a Mormon Kid come? Mebby he'd headed fer Rocky Point an' bin nabbed again by Tate Truett. Just like luck to go thataway. The Kid'd be worth a thousand to Tate.

"Hell," muttered the Cowskin Boss. "He's worth ten times that tuh me. Twenty! Fifty! The sky's the limit. An' when I've used him, I'll feed him to the catfish. Then I'll own the J Lazy D. Yeah. . . . an' I'll play me some politics. Be senator mebby. Senator Wash Grimes of Montana. Humph. Damn his eyes, that Mormon Kid's gotta come. But if he ain't here in half a hour more, I'm goin' in an' figger on someone else. . . ."

He clipped off his muttering, his dreaming, shrank back into the leafless thicket by the river. Down the storm wind had drifted a sound. There it came again. Some feller singin' . . .

. . . now speakin' of yore charms,
An' speakin' of yore farms,
An' speakin' of yore silver an' yore gold,
But the cowboy's life is the weary, dreary life,
A-ridin' through the heat an' the cold . . .

A rider, his horse plainly showing its battling with the drifts, moved down to the opposite margin of the stream. A rider buried to the eyes in a thick blanket coat yet who sang lustily. That song was only to combat the drugging urge to sleep—the sleep from which there is no awakening.

Drawing rein at the water's edge, the rider paused briefly. His brows were white with frost. His breath rose in a cloud. His eyes, streaming from tobacco he had rubbed in them to keep them open, strayed upstream a hundred yards or so to where the snow-piled roofs of saloon, barns and outbuildings loomed like rounded domes. Then he stirred his weary pony with the steel, moved slowly across the ford.

Washita's hand came out of his pocket. There was a gun in it. His eyes, hard and bright, watched every movement of horse and rider. He waited until the horse had its front hoofs out of the stream, until he could see the pupils of the lone rider's steel-grey eyes beneath the drooping Stetson. Then he squeezed the trigger.

The horse stopped, shuddered, heaved over on its side. It was dead before it hit the shallow flow at the bank. The rider, numb with cold, failed to unship his feet from the stirrups, went down with his mount. He was soaked to the waist but quite unharmed as he jerked his under leg free.

Apparently unmoved, he deliberately extricated his other foot, waded to the shore. As he lowered the collar of his coat, Washita saw that he was tall, straight, dark and — yes, twenty-two. For one rueful moment, he stared down at his quivering pony, then turned slitted eyes to the thicket from which the shot had come. And looked into the coldest eyes in the world. Snake eyes. Wolf eyes. Killer eyes. Eyes that held his own in an unshakable grip. A full minute passed, then—

"Thanks, stranger," he said in a flat tone. "You only done what the storm was about to do to that game little bronc. Or was you mebbyso shootin' at me?"

"If I shoot at you," replied Washita grimly, "you'll be askin' no questions afterward. Lift yore hands high an' walk straight to'rds me!"

With an easy smile, a careless shrug, the Kid complied. Now he stood shivering from cold, but quite fearless before the muzzle of Washita's steady gun. The evil genius of Cowskin Crossing lifted the Kid's pistol, patted him over for hideouts, then got behind him.

"Now what?" asked the Kid.

Washita hesitated. This one was a thousand dollars on the hoof—dead or alive. There were men in the barroom yonder who would skin a kinsman alive for half that. And Washita was playing for big stakes. In decent weather he would have assigned the Kid his part and sent him along his way. But it wouldn't do in this blizzard. The Kid had ridden far, was badly in need of warmth, of rest and food. A wailing gust of wind fetched the answer. Snow fell blindingly. Like a curtain. Blotting out everything beyond a meagre radius.

"Start walkin'!" ordered Washita. "An' walk easy if yuh don't want a hole in yore neck."

Prodding the youngster before him, he steered a way that led them unobserved to the rear of the saloon, out of which filtered the ribald laughter of rivermen, breeds and longriders who had seen the elephant and hearkened to the hoot of the owl. A good place to keep his prize out of. So Washita shoved the Kid into the kitchen.

A rush of smoke, from burning food, smashed the Kid in the face. Behind him, Washita swore feelingly, shoved his prisoner ahead. And the Kid swerved to avoid treading on a woman, who sobbed and stirred.

As the wind of their entrance dissipated the smoke, the Kid looked down into the dazed eyes of the woman of Cowskin Crossing, shuddered at the pain and misery and impatient lust for death that he read there. It stirred him profoundly. But hardly more than Washita's brutal but carefully muted order. . . .

"Git up outa that, woman! What yuh doin' on the floor whilst good grub burns up? Crawl up on yore laigs, by hell, or I'll fetch the quirt an'. . . ."

"I'll. . . . I'll get up," she said weakly, and tried to, stumbled and fell again. It was the young stranger, under the muzzle of Washita's gun, who leaped to her aid, drew her to her feet.

"She's sick, man," he protested, feeling the weakness in her wasted body. "She orta be in bed, right this minute."

"Bed, hell!" snarled Washita. "You turn loose uh her! Git on through that door yonder. An' you, woman, tie into breakfast fer us, or else. . . ."

"My ring. . . ," she begged, extending a trembling claw. "My ring."

"Shut up!" commanded Washita, unfeelingly. "You ain't got no more ring."

He followed the Kid into the living room, warm with a singing fire in the stove. Muttering curses, Washita shied his hat into a corner, drew off coat and overshoes. The younger man also shed his storm clothes, his face still dark as he brooded over the treatment of that pitiful crone in the kitchen. Standing slim and straight, his back to the fire, he was one to command a second look anywhere. Appraising him, Washita smiled with satisfaction.

"Amazin'!" he applauded. "Amazin'. Why. . . . you even look like him!"

"Look like who?"

A sly look came into Washita's eyes as he motioned the younger man to a chair.

"Set. It's plumb lucky you come here instead uh Rocky Point, Mr. Mormon Kid. Yonder you'd uh found a rope fer tuh stretch yore neck. Here you'll find a proposition that'll make you the biggest cowman in Montana."

He paused to observe the effect of his announcement. The Kid smiled and his steel-grey eyes flickered strangely.

"Talk is cheap," he said tonelessly. "But it takes mazuma to buy whiskey. If I missed runnin' into a hang rope, I'm lucky. But when you talk about the biggest cowman in Montana, yo're takin' in a heap of cattle territory, neighbor. What's the rip?"

Washita winked broadly. "Yuh see,

Kid, certain gents is on yore trail, believin' yo're the Mormon Kid, killer, stage robber an' worse. But me, I might convince 'em that you was somebody else. . . . if you was johnny-wise."

"Who, fer instance?"

"Le's say Tal Clayborn. Son of my old pard. You got the same hair, same eyes, even look like Tal did twenty-five year ago. The fact that Tal died before he got around to marryin' an' havin' kids don't matter. It ain't generally knowed."

The youngster's face went stony. Ugly shadows crept into his eyes.

"All right," he said coldly. "Suppose we say I'm Tal Clayborn. Then what?"

Washita shook with silent laughter. "Now yo're shoutin'. Named fer yore old man. Fine!" His face became grave. "Now that I know who yuh are," he said drily, "I'll give yuh somethin' that was yore father's. . . . somethin' that he loved."

Again Washita lifted down the cowhide box, took out the gold-inlaid gun, pressed it into the Kid's hands. The youngster inspected it, caressed it, his face glowing with admiration.

"What a beauty," he breathed. "What about it?"

"Tal won it at Cheyenne. Best all-around cowboy."

"How'd you get it?"

Washita gulped, searched the Kid's hard eyes.

"He—er—he lost it here playin' poker. I bought it from the breed that won it."

The Kid nodded. "Forty-four, eh," he mused, and deliberately slid a cartridge from his belt, shoved it through the loading gate, spun the cylinder. Now he shifted, turned the weapon swiftly on Washita.

"Lift out yore gun with thumb an' forefinger!" he snapped icily. "Toss it away. Careful! That's it. Now we kin talk comfortable. What's this all about? What's yore game?"

Washita grinned, openly pleased. This kid didn't need much instruction. If he acted natural, he could pass anywhere for the son of Tal Clayborn.

"Game?" he chuckled. "Best part uh this game is the way you handle that iron. Like it'd bin yores instead uh. . . ."

"I feel like it had always been mine."

"Good. It is yores now. Keep it allus by yuh. It'll lead yuh from the wanted outlaw you are to the biggest cowman in Montana, just like I said."

"How?"

"Like this." Washita leaned forward. "You stay here till this storm's over. Then I'll start yuh over the Dog Crick trail to the Judiths. You'll find a big cow an' hawss outfit yonder. The J Lazy D. One of the biggest. You'll be stopped, fer nobody sneaks up on that outfit. Tell 'em yo're Tal Clayborn; the name's a ticket straight in. Tell 'em you hone tuh see Jeff Dixon. An' watch Ol' Jeff break his neck gettin' a look at yuh."

"Why?"

"'Cause he'll think shore yore mother was. . . . aw hell, that don't make no difference tuh you. Ol' Jeff'll act like he hates yuh, which he will. But likewise he'll love yuh 'cause he can't he'p hisself. He'll hate yuh fer this gun you'll show tuh prove who yuh are. He'll love yuh when you show him this. . . ."

Washita dug out the plain gold band from his vest pocket, handed it to the Kid. The youngster examined it curiously, read the inscription, raised quizzical eyes to the boss of Cowskin Crossing.

"A ring," he said softly. "Is this the one the woman in the kitchen wants?"

Washita bridled. "Tuh hell with her. Leave her outa this. This ain't that ring."

"Whose is it?"

"Yore mother's!"

"Oh!" The Kid grinned, but his pale eyes held a hooded smokiness. "My mother's."

"Shore." Washita rubbed his palms

raspingly. "An' them two gadgets outa the past will make you anything you want tuh be when you ride yonderly. Here's the yarn: They was give to you by yore mother on her death bed. Yore dad havin' died some ten years ago. Yore ma asked you tuh find Jeff Dixon an' say she'd said a prayer each day fer twenty-five years, askin' forgiveness. You won't need to explain fer what. If you tell it thataway; if you show Jeff you'd like tuh stay with him, he'll make yuh ramrod of his outfit an' mebbyso marry yuh off to his niece who gits the spread when he dies."

"Marry me off. . . ." The Kid looked scared.

"Shore. You ain't married already, are yuh?"

"No. . . . but . . . ."

"The' ain't no buts. When yuh see the gal, you'll wanta stay. If she don't git yuh, the law will. Jeff'll want it tuh happen, 'cause he'll love yuh both. He'll talk harsh an' mean to yuh, cuss yuh out ugly an' frequent 'cause he'll hate yuh, too. But you kin have anything you want up there."

The Kid studied, turning the ring over in his fingers.

"It sounds good," he admitted. "But why yuh doin' this fer me? Why. . . .?"

"Why shouldn't I?" The high-priest of Cowskin Crossing smirked. "Yore dad was my saddle pard, wasn't he?"

"You say he was," countered the Kid. "Why else?"

Washita's lips flattened. His dark eyes congealed with the cold savagery that was part of him.

"Yo're smart," he admitted, grudgingly. "You see things quicker'n most. You ask questions that count. The way you put me under yore gun, few minutes ago, showed yo're no part of a fool. But neither am I. Don't worry none about how Washita Grimes comes out in this. He looks after hisself. Worry about yoreself an' the law I'm tryin' tuh save yuh from."

A knock rattled the door. The old woman of the kitchen was announcing breakfast.

ECHOES

Undisturbed by the restless ghosts of Cowskin Crossing, the Kid slept the clock clear around. He wakened with a strange feeling that something was wrong, lay there a full minute without opening his eyes. Every sense alert. Reaching out for the answer.

There was a queer feel to the air. Almost a funny smell. The cry of the wind still sounded at the eaves, but it was a changed sound. A song instead of a moan. The jackpines on the gumbo ridge crooned. The bare limbs of the cottonwoods clacked happily. From somewhere came the shrill neigh of a horse. Cattle bawled. The world seemed to be whimpering, whispering a gladsome prayer of thanksgiving. From the eaves came the *drip, drip* of melting snow and the *chunk* of loosened icicles.

Though the Kid, fresh from southern ranges, didn't know it, he was listening to the voice of the Chinook.

How warm it had turned. Leaping from his bed, the Kid stepped to the window, flung back the blanket blind. The storm had passed. The sky was an unmarred dome of amethyst. The sun shone blindingly. Magically, the high points were already clearing of their snow load and the Kid almost felt he could see the grass popping through. Soon the trails would be open, and then. . . .

Down at the barn he could see Washita, talking earnestly with a trio of riders. And sight of the man marred the clean, fresh beauty of budding spring. The click of a door behind him, caused the Kid to whirl. Back to the door she had just entered, the kitchen crone stood cringing, trying pitifully to control her fear of men, trying equally pitifully to smile.

The Kid, standing in his underwear, felt a little foolish. But something bigger than his modesty kept him facing her, prevented him snatching for his britches that hung over the end of the bed.

"I ain't hardly fit fer a female woman's eyes," he apologized. "If you-all will step outside, I'll fix myself up."

"Don't!" she breathed. "There isn't time. He'll be coming back."

She came toward him. Her eyes were locked on his own and she saw nothing else. Now she stopped before him, her stare direct and embarrassing. Yet strangely, the Kid felt no embarrassment. He waited for her to speak, realizing somehow that this woman's mind was groping in the dim past. A deep pity stirred him. She reached out trembling fingers to touch his face.

Tal, and I suppose he blames you for my going away. Washita has boasted that Jeff believes you ran away with me. Which made my plans to escape from this hell seem so futile without Jeff to welcome me."

"Washita mebbyso lied about Jeff," said the Kid, tonelessly.

"God, oh, God, I pray so!" whispered the woman. "Even though I can never go to him, I want him to think well of me. But Jeff mustn't ever know. If he knew about this man taking me here he would have come for him with his guns. And he would be killed like . . . like . . . I've seen Washita kill men before. He mustn't know, Tal. He's married again and it would spoil his happiness."

The Kid looked down at the frail and withered woman that clung to him. Living for the moment a life that had gone by.

"He Must Never Know"

"Tal!" she breathed, and an awful bewilderment flamed in her sunken eyes. "You . . . you lived, and came back."

"Yes." Something bigger than himself bade the Kid encourage her.

"I was afraid, Tal. Afraid he'd killed you." The hunted look grew on her face. "Tal . . . I'm sorry. Sorry I dragged you into this. You were kind in trying to save me from Washita's hate when I was too stubborn to take your advice about riding away from the ranch alone."

"That's all right, Violet." The Kid played a long chance, speaking the name engraved on the ring. The fierce gladness that leaped into the woman's eyes told him he had guessed right—and that Washita had lied.

"That's like you, Tal," the woman murmured gladly. "Always trying to help someone. But you never knew what Jeff thought when you followed me, hoping to trap Washita. Jeff doubted your motives,

A terrible anger seethed through the Kid at the spectacle of what the years had brought her. His throat choked as he looked into that wistful face. And as he looked, the years seemed to drop away, and the wrinkles. He knew, now, that the words she had been speaking were only echoes of a dead past. Tragic echoes.

"I'll keep on helpin'," he promised her softly. "We'll figger out someway. . . ."

She interrupted him. "No use, Tal. Washita don't recognize you. It's too late to do anything. If he finds out he'll only kill you sure this time. Let me thank you for what you've done." She paused, glancing apprehensively behind her. "Now I must go. . . ."

"I understand," he murmured, and patted her toil worn hand.

A sudden terror seemed to possess the woman. She rubbed her lips with the back of her thin hand, her eyes filled with puzzlement. As if trying to decipher a blurred

page from the tattered book of her life. She glanced about nervously.

"Tal," she whispered. "You must help me."

"How, Violet?"

"Washita! He has my ring. It's all I have. Will you get it for me?"

"Yes, Violet," he said softly. "I'll get it. Don't worry."

He pressed her hand comfortingly. There was magic in the act and in his words. For now she stood straighter, looked stronger, and there was a tint of color in her faded, sunken cheeks.

Then suddenly the old terrors were dogging her again. She drew back, appearing to listen. She paled; her hands went to her throat. Then she was rushing from the room. And her closing of the door was echoed by Washita's heavy tread as he entered the building.

There was a terrible, smoking anger in the Kid's eyes as he reached for his clothes.

"Damn yore black soul to hell!" he raged, his lips furling like a cat's.

He might have been cursing that strange old woman. Or the Tal she had mistaken him for in her mind's wanderings. But the Kid was cursing neither. He was condemning the soul of Washita Grimes, who even now grinned his way through the Kid's door to explain that they were rigging him a horse. That he had best undertake the hill trail to the J Lazy D before the gumbo ridges lay bare and the coulees became roaring rivers.

THE J LAZY D

Where the trail crossed a narrow coulee, the Kid was again stopped by a warning bullet. This time past his ear. Quieting his startled, rearing pony, the Kid sat quietly as two riders broke cover, separated to quarter in on him.

The older, a bulky, black-bearded stalwart, reined in before the Kid, eyed him up and down, his gaze coldly impersonal, his right hand near his gun.

"Where yuh headin', feller?"

"For the J Lazy D."

"Oh," said the bearded one, with a quick glance at his companion. "He's headin' fer the J Lazy D. What fer, feller?"

"Lookin' for Jeff Dixon."

"Jeff, eh? Lookin' for him such as how?"

"Private business, between him an' me."

"Private business . . . well, well. I reckon you'd better spill that business, son, if you aim tuh fetch up at the J Lazy D. What's it about?"

"That's my business," replied the Kid, coolly. "But if I'm turned back an' write him about it, two of you hairpins is gonna be hard tuh ketch."

The bearded rider's eyes flickered.

"Who are yuh?" he asked more civilly.

"Name of Tal Clayborn!" Both men started, stared. "I'll tell you what you do. Take this gun of mine to Ol' Jeff. Tell him Tal Clayborn craves to see him. I'll wait here till you git back."

"Le's have it," nodded the bearded man, and took the gold mounted .44. For a moment he admired it, then thrust it into his jeans. Muttering an order for his pardner to watch the Kid, he loped away.

He was gone an hour, during which pause the Kid couldn't get ten words out of the uncommunicative J Lazy D man. When the bearded rider came back, his face still reflected his awe at the reactions his news had stirred at the J Lazy D.

"I'm tuh fetch yuh in," he growled. "But if I know Jeff Dixon, you better wheel yore cayuse an' hightail. Hearin' the name uh Tal Clayborn shore put him on the prod."

The Kid grinned. "My gun. . . ."

"Ol' Jeff done kept it."

"Good. Le's go where it is."

The bearded cowboy nodded, led the way. And so the Kid came to the J Lazy D rambling log buildings scattered in a friendly pocket of the Judith Hills. Just as its countless cattle and horses were scattered over a thousand square miles of range.

Quitting his horse at the barn, the Kid felt the impact of suspicious eyes. Felt the studied scrutiny of a dozen-odd, lolling punchers. He smiled grimly, shook the kinks from his long legs. His eyes turned up the street-like lane flanked by bunkhouses, blacksmith shop, saddle house, tool shed and store rooms. At the end of that lane squatted the imposing log ranch house. Upon its broad portico, a square figure sat slumped in a rawhide chair. Behind him stood a slender, shapely spot of color. A woman.

The Kid started toward them, an uneasy gnawing in his breast. That house appeared before him like a barrier. Behind him were hard, ill-mannered riding men. Odds to make a man nervous. The Kid fell back on a youthful recklessness and his brief and fatal philosophy. What the cards held for him was certain to happen. Nothing else mattered.

Wrapped in a buffalo robe, Old Jeff Dixon watched the Kid approach with no outward sign of emotion. Gray of eye, direct of gaze, a tall and imposing figure of massive shoulders and leonine head, the cowman was old, but not too old. Though not as handsome and colorful as in another, earlier day, he radiated substantial strength and unswerving honesty. And a certain outward bitterness. His high-arched nose and firm, bold jaw hinted at dormant passions. His steady gray eyes revealed unplumbed reservoirs of fire and energy . . . also the scars of an old and unhealed hurt.

Thus the Kid appraised him as he neared. Yet the leisure of his glance was for the beautiful girl who stood behind the cowman, her graceful fingers running lovingly through his iron-gray hair. She was trimly muscular, filling her Levi's and plaid flannels as if poured into them. Her boots were starred, her Stetson wide and cream colored. Her wavy chestnut hair was cropped, like a boy's. The dark fringes of her hazel eyes added spice to her beauty. She was darkly tanned, her teeth white and even as she smiled at this tall young stranger who claimed the name of Tal Clayborn.

The Kid stopped abruptly, whipped off his hat, inclined his head. His eyes now were on the golden gun, loosely held by the grim old cowman.

"Howdy, folks," he greeted them, and grinned to hide the tremors the girl's glance had set up in him. "I'm Tal Clayborn."

The cowman straightened slightly, snorted contemptuously.

"Leave us, Violet," he commanded. "I wanta be free to tell this . . . this . . ."

He paused, choking. The girl, laughing softly as she took a last rumple at his towsy hair, murmured an obedient, "Yes, Uncle Jeff," winked slyly at the Kid and flounced into the house. Silence fell. The two men looked directly into each other's eyes in a test of wills. Neither faltered. Twin spots of red burned in Jeff Dixon's weathered cheeks as he cleared his throat noisily.

"I hate a liar!" he blurted. "You ain't nothin' but a kid. Tal Clayborn would be as old as me. Where'd yuh git this gun?"

"What do you think?" countered the Kid, meaningly.

"I don't know. Stole it mebby from Tal Clayborn, damn his skunk hide!"

"Yo're talkin' about my dad!" rebuked the youngster, solemnly.

The cowman started. "Dad . . .? You mean to say . . . cripes! Tal Clayborn's son. Quick, feller, who was yore mother?"

"Who was she?" the Kid acted puzzled.

"What's her name? Her first name?"

The Kid didn't answer. Just pulled out the plain gold band and handed it to Jeff

Dixon. The cowman's face twitched as he examined it, prey to haunting ghosts of the past. "From Jeff to Violet," he mumbled, and a miracle seemed to be wrought in him. The hardness, the strength, seemed to fall away from him, leaving him old, weary, touched with the hand of grief. Two tears crowded out of his eyes, crawled slowly down the sides of his nose. He dashed them away angrily. . . .

"Take a chair," he choked. "God knows I'd orta hate you bad as I've hated yore dad all these years, but . . ."

"Why?" asked the Kid.

"Why? Why . . ." the cowman's eyes were full of ire. "You ask me why, damn yore soul? Well . . . mebby that ain't right. Mebby you don't know. I kin see where neither one of 'em would take much pleasure in tellin' it. Yore dad—Tal Clayborn—he's . . .?"

"Dead!"

"Good riddance! Violet—yore mother—she's—she's—she's well an' happy?"

"Neither well nor happy," said the youngster morosely. "For twenty-five years she's prayed each day fer the strength to break away an' come back here."

"Prayed . . . come back . . .?" Jeff Dixon stared and fighting fires came flooding back into his eyes. "Condemn his rotten soul." It was not a curse, but a prayer.

"Amen," said the Kid.

"You hate him, too?"

"I hate him, too."

Old Jeff seemed satisfied. "Why'd you come here?" he demanded.

" 'Cause I wanta be here. Just as she wants to be here."

Old Jeff flinched. "God, oh, God," he prayed, just as the crone at Cowskin Crossing had prayed. "He'p me to be big about this. He'p me to be right."

Deep silence fell. The Kid waited. Jeff Dixon raised deeply gloomed eyes.

"If . . . if I wanted to talk with her . . ." he suggested. "Where's she at?"

"Le's not ride in with sharp rawls," cautioned the Kid. "Suppose we let that ride till you make up yore mind . . . till you git right."

Old Jeff nodded. "That's best, son. You don't understand my feelin's an' mebby it's better so. I'm lettin' you stay here, though ever' time I see yore face, hate will bile up inside me an' I'll look back across the hell I've lived here on this earth. What's yore line?"

"I'm a cowman," said the Kid, proudly. "As good a one as my father before me."

"An' the' was none better," admitted the cowman, grudgingly. "But mind this. Yore dad raised hell with one woman on this ranch. I'll not have his whelp makin' sheep eyes at Violet, my niece. Don't forget that—ever. Shag yore plunder into the bunkhouse yonder. You'll git the same treatment as any other hand. Mebby worse if you ain't as good as you claim."

UNMASKED

But the Kid was every bit as good as his boast. Better. In a hundred different ways in those first few busy weeks, he proved it. Though his rimfire rig and short tiehard Manila of southern ranges drew the jibes of the other cowboys, he made them admit that he could outride them, outrope them and do the work of two men as they broke out the big remudas prior to the start of spring round-up. This one, they admitted grudgingly, was a top rider.

Whispers of their admiration drifted to Old Jeff's ears. And, with ill-humored promptness, he lifted the Kid's pay. The girl, Violet, was the first and only one to congratulate him. It happened when the Kid came to the house looking for Old Jeff who had ridden out alone.

"I'm glad," she smiled, eyeing the prideful way he sat the saddle.

"I'm glad that yo're glad," he grinned back. "What about?"

"That Uncle Jeff made you top rider. And . . . if you'll cross your heart and hope to die, I'll tell you a secret."

Soberly, he went through the motions.

"Quick," he begged, laughing. "I'm plumb et up with curiosity."

"Uncle Jeff's giving you a wagon, come calf tally."

"No?"

"Yes, Mister Tal Clayborn. And listen to me. Don't you mind his harsh talk to you. He don't mean it. He likes you a lot. He told me so. And sometimes I think he almost loves you."

"Loves me? Why . . .?"

For an instant she hesitated, a bold resolve etching her beautiful face.

"Light down and come in," she invited. "I'll show you. Just follow along."

He swung down, followed her into the musty old house with its shabby, old-fashioned furniture, its somber air inspired by twenty-five years of grieving. Now the girl stopped, pointed to a large framed picture hung above the fireplace.

"There's the answer . . . your mother."

The Kid looked long and soberly at the beautiful face smiling down at him—the same face he had seen in the vision at Cowskin Crossing. His lips parted and he was on the verge of telling this girl about that crone down there, about that other Violet. But something held his words. He faced the girl.

"She's like you," he said, softly.

She flushed. "That's hardly a compliment," she said tartly. "And no matter what I might say about her, it couldn't hurt you as bad as she hurt Uncle Jeff. How could she have done such a terrible thing? And why did your father . . .?"

Choked with emotion, she paused, staring at him dumbly. A queer little smile twisted the corners of the Kid's mouth. He, who had been a stoic before the muzzle of Washita's gun, now trembled. . . .

"She didn't!" he said firmly. "Nor did he—the one you call Tal Clayborn."

"Why . . .?" she gasped. "How . . .?"

"Faith," he said with mature wisdom, "is like a delicate flower. Crush it and you destroy its beauty. Without knowin' what yo're talkin' about, ma'am, yo're wrongin' a woman who's died a thousand deaths. Yes, an' a good man who's . . . dead."

In biting words that were an agony torn from the soul of him, he condemned her doubt—the doubt that had ruled the J Lazy D for nearly a generation. Voiced his contempt for the outfit and his determination to leave it. He turned away from her, striding angrily. She caught him on the wide portico, held him with a strength far beyond her soft muscles.

"Tal . . .!" she cried, and her eyes were like a frightened doe's. "You can't go away now. You mustn't. I told you that Uncle Jeff loved you. I didn't tell half. I, too . . . I . . ."

He read the longing in her eyes, took her into his strong arms.

"Violet!" he murmured into her soft hair. "Violet! Because you have asked it, I'll stay . . . always!"

He kissed her upturned lips, pressed her close. Struggling, she broke away, her face crimson.

"Is that a cousinly kiss?" she demanded. "I ask you?"

"No part of it," he said boldly. "I can't ever kiss you like a cousin, Violet. 'Cause I ain't."

He turned away, almost bumped into

raging Jeff Dixon, who had observed the caress and was on the prod.

"You disreputable young scoundrel!" he bawled. "Ketched you up to yore father's lousy tricks! Violet, go to yore room!" The girl slipped away like a wraith and the cowman scowled at his top rider. "Now, my philanderin' young buck, what you gotta say?"

"I love her," said the Kid, simply.

"You're cousins . . . fool!" thundered Old Jeff. "You can't love . . . thataway."

"We ain't cousins!" the Kid roared back. "An' I do love her . . . thataway."

He wheeled away with clinking spurs, forked his pony and loped down to the corrals. Popeyed with rage and puzzlement, Jeff Dixon stared after him. Tal Clayborn had been just like that twenty-five years ago. Reliant, self-contained, very, very sure of himself.

The weather had definitely turned spring's corner. The range was greening, the grass long enough to crop. The Kid had his wagon . . . and another lift in pay. The outfit was ready, girding itself against the month-long rigors of the calf tally. More and more responsibility had Old Jeff Dixon put upon the broad shoulders of the tall youngster from southern ranges—the one he both loved and hated. For he was now wearing his new badge of office and was very busy organizing hard-eyed riders with the authority of a nation behind them. His marshal's posse. Jeff was planning round-up, not of cattle, but of men. And not the least of those men was Washita Grimes, directing genius of the Cowskin Crossing gang.

And so much of the organization of the wagon outfits was left to the Kid.

Riding alone one day, breaking to his personal uses a tamed mustang that was already a top cow pony in the making, the Kid saw a running man break from a thicket and come leaping toward him with nervous glances over his shoulder. The Kid calmed his snorting mustang, swung down and waited.

The man, a frightened, shifty-eyed river breed, grunted, handed the Kid a note without comment, then darted away in a different direction from which he had come. The Kid unfolded the soiled missive and read:

> Mormon Kid:
>
> Meet me at Flat-top Butte in the Dog Leg Bend of the Missouri River before the sky turns red tomorrow at dawn. Don't fail me.
>
> Washita.

The youngster's face clouded. Very carefully he tore the note to bits. His eyes were like twin agates. His lips curled in a snarl. Engrossed in a bitter wonder as to the renegade's reason for this summons, the Kid failed to hear a soft tread that neared, stopped.

"Mighty careful, ain't yuh, Mister Mormon Kid?"

The Kid whirled, looked into the flushed and scornful face of the younger Violet, queen of the J Lazy D. Her eyes fluttered between the wind-blown fragments of the note and his puzzled face. Her hand was on the grip of her holstered .38. The Kid tried to smile.

"Careful? What you mean, ma'am?"

"Don't stall, you miserable outlaw! I stopped that prowling breed and read his note. Then turned him loose to deliver it, little dreaming it would be you. You came like a snake in the dark, calling yourself Tal Clayborn. Preparing to fang them that trusted you. Mormon Kid! Killer, thief, member of the notorious Washita Grimes band! I should shoot you dead and leave your carcass for the wolves!"

"Why don't you?" he asked softly.

"I . . . I can't." Her slender shoulders drooped. "I don't know why."

"I do," he said grimly. "It's because you don't believe what yore eyes has seen. Can't believe it. Lissen to me: Innocent men has been hung. If you believe what you've just read, shoot me down! But if

you can't do that, fer God's sake hold yore tongue. Don't tell Ol' Jeff."

"But . . . but I've got to tell him."

"Why?"

"Because he and his marshals are riding into the badlands at daybreak tomorrow. They're after Washita Grimes. According to this note, he'll be meeting you on Flat Top."

"Where they ridin'?" asked the Kid, half fearfully.

"Cowskin Crossing! They're killing or capturing every person there, then burning that snake den to the ground."

The Kid shuddered. "You tell yore uncle," he said fiercely, "that I'm meetin' Washita on the butte at dawn. Tell him to take two men an' hide up yonder. He'll hear somethin' that'll interest him a heap. Tell him I said not to move against Cowskin till after he hears me an' Washita talk. An' don't tell him nothin' else."

She opened her mouth to speak, but the Kid had leaped into the saddle and was spurring away toward the ranch. The girl looked after him, shaken body and soul, distraught, not knowing whether to trust the dictates of her heart or of her mind.

RENDEZVOUS

That night the Kid's place at the chuck table was vacant, as was his bunk when the hands turned in. It occasioned some little comment. For come dawn of the morrow, the wagon outfits would be rolling out for the calf work. At least, such was the plan. But the Kid knew that the start wouldn't be made. And to avoid explanation, and to cool his heated nerves, he rode alone beneath the stars with his thoughts. Chaotic thoughts.

Nor could he have told where he rode. Except that when the lift of a tawny moon told him that midnight had come and gone, he headed his pony for the river . . . and the flat-topped butte where it swings the angular Dog Leg Bend.

The night was still, so still that his hoofbeats up the rock-strewn butte trail sounded eerily loud, startling. Reaching the top, with its scattered clumps of stunted jackpines, the Kid rein-tied his pony in the open, rolled a cigarette and sat down to smoke it. Dreaming dreams. Wondering if his meeting with Washita was a rendezvous with death. Wondering what fate held for him in the matter of a new-found happiness that was already an agony within him.

The Kid believed he knew why Washita had summoned him. And if he was right, he'd have to kill the man—or be killed. Daybreak would witness showdown that would allow of no alternative, no compromise. And great as was his distaste for the part he must play in that drama, the Kid knew in his heart he'd go clear through with it. Only the death of Washita Grimes could ease the hate that had grown to be a fever in his heart.

Time dragged. The moon lowered turtle-like into the West. But as yet there was none of the pallid flush that ran before the dawn. Somewhere a tiny flutter of movement jarred the Kid into wary alertness. Ghost-like, a figure moved out of the tree gloom. The Kid slid his pistol free. Someone called his name.

"Tal!"

It was Old Jeff. He came humping forward to face the waiting Kid.

"Lissen, Tal," muttered the old cowman. "I come on this wild goose chase, figgerin' to see yore crazy play through. But the longer I wait, the crazier it gits. Violet didn't tell me nothin' except that I was to lissen in an' not to send men to the Crossin' till I heard what was said here. If it's a decoy to put that blasted renegade in my hands, I'm obliged. If it's a trick . . . what the hell is it all about?"

The Kid snorted. "I left word fer you to stay hid," he growled. "Washita's a wolf. Let him smell you out an' you'll know how it feels to die."

The Kid felt Old Jeff's eyes on him in the moonlight, saw him shake his head as he looked down into the narrows of Dog Leg Bend, hearkening to the song of the snow-swollen river as it muttered of the dire things it had seen in its age-old cycles. The cowman sighed.

"Long time since I was last here," he murmured bitterly. "More'n twenty-five years. The night I tracked 'em here."

"Who?"

"Yore dad, damn him!" snarled Old Jeff. "An'—" his voice softened, "—an' yore mother. Tracked 'em right to where we're standin', then to the edge yonder. That was the end of the trail. Same time of the year. Spring! River rampagin' jest as she is right now. The sign was plain. Seein' I had 'em ketched, they jumped for it. Into that hell-water below. A nine mile stretch uh cactus-haired hell, till the river widens out at Cowskin Crossin'. Don't seem humanly possible that—" he scratched his grizzled thatch "—that she could've cared enough fer Tal to—to foller him thataway."

"Yo're the only man she'd done that for," the Kid rebuked him. "An' Tal cared too much for both of you to ever ask her to do what yo're thinkin'."

"What the hell you sayin'?" demanded Jeff. "You may believe that hog wash, but don't ask me to. Didn't I track 'em right here, like I said? Didn't the trail end plumb at the brink, yonder?"

"You was trackin' a wolf when you hit yonder brink," countered the Kid. "A wolf that aimed to make the sign read thataway. A wolf that covered his tracks when he left the top."

"What yuh mean by that?" barked Old Jeff, staring.

"Lissen!" ordered the Kid. Through the night came the muted flutter of hoofbeats. "Here comes Washita. Playin' the cards close to his belly. Fetchin' his gun riders!"

"Comin' hell fer leather," agreed the cowman, and his seamed face broke into a savage grin of joy. "So much the better. I taken yore message, Tal, an' split 'er fifty-fifty. I rode here to lissen in. But I sent my posse to Cowskin Crossin' with orders tuh burn that snake nest out. An', if a single gun is fired, to wipe out all the spawn of hell they find there."

Tal started. "No?" he gasped. "You didn't do that?"

"I shore did."

"Wimmen, too?"

The cowman-marshal sneered. "Wimmen . . . bah! What kinda wimmen would be at Cowskin? Bad 'uns! Tuh hell with 'em. If them critters, worse'n them they cater to, play with fire, leave 'em git burnt."

"When hide-bound men like you make laws an' rules," said the Kid, bitterly, "like you've just done, they're usually in the dark an' plumb wrong. You made a bad mistake in sendin' yore men yonder."

"Why?"

The Kid scowled. "No time to explain, now. Git back in the trees an' lay low. Keep yore mouth shut an' yore ears open. Then mebby you'll learn how wrong you've bin."

The Kid pushed Old Jeff away and the cowman melted into the blackness. The Kid sat down on a rock, his ears busy as he fashioned a smoke. He heard the swift-moving cavalcade reach the foot of the butte trail, heard the low mutter of voices, then the shambling clatter of one man's boots. That ceased now, and the Kid knew that Washita peered over the rim. Keening the air like a wolf. Smelling out trouble.

A minute passed. Two. The Kid smoked placidly, eyeing the complaining canyon narrows, where the fog from the tortured stream lifted in writhing wisps. At the first sound of Washita's renewed tread, the youngster drew a deep sigh of relief, settled himself to await the renegade's approach.

"Well, Kid," there was a false note to

Washita's bluff heartiness. "So you come, eh? I wasn't shore that yuh would."

"Why shouldn't I?" The Kid rose to face him. "If I'd knowed what this place was like, I'd bin here long before. Straight drop into the boilin' river as it roundsides the hill like a cinch. An' moonlight, with steam writhin' through it. . . ."

As he spoke, he edged to the brink. Looking down into the far bend. Washita moved with him, eyeing him with deadly directness. Chuckling unmusically.

"Only a feller in love talks thataway, Kid. How about the gal?"

"She's well," came the careless answer. "An' cunnin' as a kitten."

"Tuh hell with them things!" rapped Washita. "How you buildin' up to her? How's the play comin'? Will she marry yuh?"

"So You Ain't The Mormon Kid?"

"How can I know what's in a gal's heart?" parried the Kid.

"You better know! Be wise, marry her off an' leave the law smellin' at the Mormon Kid's blind trail. I've kept tabs on you. You've moved fast; faster'n I figgered. Ol' Jeff likes yuh. Yo're as good as ramroddin' the spread right now."

"Only because the foreman's got other work to do!" countered the Kid.

"An' that work's what I called yuh here about. That foreman's bin lined up fer law work by Ol' Jeff. Marshal work. They're figgerin' to run me outa Cowskin, outa the country mebby. Or kill me. We gotta speed up our plans some. Build up to Jeff's niece. If she stands yuh off, force it. Make her yores without benefit uh skypilot. . . ."

The Kid took a swift step toward him, his hand flashing to his holster. Washita gave back.

"Draw on me, young feller," he snarled, "an' it's yore finish. Don't be a fool. I got twenty men down yonder blockin' the only trail down. Now about that gal. Git it fixed up. Then it'll be easy fer you to steer Jeff offa my tail. An' . . ." he glared, ". . . you better not fail. 'Cause shore as he nabs me, they'll make the Mormon Kid hard tuh ketch . . . lissen!"

They both turned their faces toward the paling east. Someone was riding up the butte trail—coming fast. A rider cleared the rim, cast his eyes about, stirred his pony toward the wary pair at the brink. He curbed cruelly, made a running dismount and stood before Washita. He was breathing fast.

"Washita . . ." he began, but the renegade cut him off.

"What you doin' here, Shotgun? Thought I told you to stay with the joint?"

"Yuh did," gasped the man. "But news come that I knowed you orta have." He cast a significant glance at the Kid, who now knew that what he had expected would not be long in coming.

"What news?" barked Washita.

"The Mormon Kid was ketched yesterday in Landusky! Sheriff Truett taken him through Cowskin not two hours ago. I headed right out tuh let yuh know."

"Good!" clipped Washita, with a wolf snarl. "Now git on back to the Crossin'."

He watched the man ride away and vanish below the rim before he swung on the tensely waiting Kid.

"So," he intoned, "you ain't the Mormon Kid, eh?"

"No! I'm not him."

"You lied tuh me."

"I didn't lie. You taken me fer the Mormon Kid an' I let it ride. One name's as good as another—sometimes better."

"Mebby I didn't have the club over yuh that I thought," purred the renegade. "Who are yuh, anyway?"

The Kid laughed bitterly. His voice reached to the farthest covert of Flat Top. "Washita, that'll need explainin'. Twenty-five years ago, a woman rode to this spot. She loved it. Followed by her husband's foreman who feared she'd cross the trail of a human coyote that hated his boss. A foreman who'd watched over the woman till even his boss had become suspicious. The woman, the coyote an' the foreman all met. Here on Flat Top. There was gunplay. The foreman was dropped. The coyote throwed his body over the rim into the river. . . ."

"Who told you this?" demanded Washita, snarling like a wolf.

"What matter?" countered the Kid. "All these years the woman's husband has believed her untrue to him. Little dreamin' that she was in a livin' hell not twenty mile from his own door. Never learnin', 'cause decent men never go to Cowskin Crossin'. Never hearin' from the woman 'cause this miserable coyote had bullied her into believin' her husband had married again. Tell me, Washita, why did the coyote shoot that foreman?"

"Because," snarled the renegade, "Tal Clayborn was a meddlin' fool. Because he stood in my way uh makin' Jeff Dixon sweat an' suffer an' pay. . . ."

"You made him sweat an' suffer, mebby," broke in the Kid, "but lacked the guts to demand payment. Scairt of the lightnin' it would have drawn down on yore head. Scairt to kill the woman fer the same reason. Tried to break her, Washita, but failed even to do that. She stood you off in her helplessness, Washita, an' has shamed you every day fer twenty-five years. . . ."

"Nobody ever shamed me," croaked the boss of Cowskin Crossing. "I've deviled her, like she was a pet snake. Laughin' at her boast that some day I'd pay fer what I'd done. Makin' her slave fer me, as Ol' Jeff has bragged he'd have me slavin' in the Big House. Tellin' her Jeff hated her an' had took another woman. Ha! Wouldn't the old badger squall if he knowed. But tuh hell with all this. It's no part of our bargain."

"Oh, yes, it is," argued the Kid, and death was in his eyes. "You shot fast when you faced Tal Clayborn. But not straight. Packin' yore lead, he fell into the flooded river, fought his way to smooth water, dragged himself up a bank where Injuns found him. They nursed him back to life an' then toted him to a doctor. Yore bullet had drilled a lung. He had to go to Arizona. Only last year he died of a trouble brought on by the wound. He lived in hopes of ridin' back here to settle, Washita, but the trip would have killed him. He never knew a well day. He told me the yarn on his death bed. Now do you know who I am?"

Washita stared. "No," he muttered sullenly. "Who?"

"I'm Tal Clayborn! Son of my father! Yore hand is on yore gun, Washita. You've got yore choice of jumpin' in the river, with more chance than my dad had, or of jerkin' yore smoke. Which?"

Washita's shoulders settled. If he felt fear, it was for the slavering jaws of the river. All his life he had answered only to gun law. The law of the fang. Now that same law was calling him to account. With a lifting lurch, his gun slid clear. And Tal Clayborn met the threat with cool and smiling precision.

LONG GAMBLE

The song of guns, not birds, greeted the dawn on Flat Top. Both Washita and the Kid held flaming pistols. But Tal, with his training for this moment, was first by a clock-tick. His ball split the renegade's heart, destroying his aim . . . and his life. From Washita's furled lips issued a despairing death cry that woke the echoes. His legs gave way,

he lurched convulsively and he shot over the brink in a shower of shale.

Rooted to the spot, Tal stood with smoking gun. Hearkening. A faint, far splash drifted up to him and a sigh shook his relaxing frame. A sigh torn away by the shrill, challenging cry of that badlands crew below the butte. And the roar of their hoofbeats.

Necessity spurred Tal to swift thinking. To stand against Washita's renegades, he'd need to seek shelter among the jackpines that hid Jeff Dixon and his two men. Such odds were hopeless, from the sounds of the spurring cavalcade. Jeff would be slain. And, Tal thought of the aging Violet at Cowskin Crossing, his men riding hell bent to clean out the rustler hideaway. There was only one way to save the old lady and to draw the renegades away from Jeff. The river!

These thoughts chased Tal's mind as he stood on the brink, eyes fastened upon the point where the first renegade would appear. In him was a cool and adventuresome resolve, a reckless lusting to prove that he was as good a man as his father had been before him.

Now came the noses of two horses over the rim. Two riders hit the top. The Kid fired calmly. One of that leading pair screamed, toppled. Others, following behind, milled in confusion. Again the Kid fired. An answering volley tore at him. He emptied his weapon, tossed it aside, deliberately drew off boots and coat, waved a jaunty farewell to the onrushing renegades and dived . . . straight out and down.

Twenty feet down, the Kid struck a rocky projection that knocked the wind from his lungs and sent him spinning through space. With the dark river gnashing up at him like a fierce and hungry beast. The fall seemed endless. In the pallid light, the white-capped waves on the river's troubled breast seemed to reach up for him, each time getting closer.

The surface was foul, ugly with bobbing drift, forbidding. Now, with a mighty twist of his muscular body, the Kid righted himself and hurtled straight down with outstretched hands. Into the clammy embrace of the Big Muddy. Missing a plunging log by inches only.

Down he went. Down, down, striving by every power at his command to tear himself free from the brutal clutch of the raging current. Until it seemed he had sunk a mile into its icy depth. Until the awful chill of its snow water had commenced to seep into his bones and his lungs ached with the agony of exhausted air.

When at last he broke the spume-drenched surface, blowing, spluttering, shaking water from his eyes, the log he had hoped to find had vanished. For long minutes, during which he eased his air-starved lungs, he allowed the turbulent flow to carry him along. Until his ears warned him of an ominous roar, and his eyes of the dashing white water ahead. Rapids.

With the roar of cascading water growing momentarily louder, Tal keyed himself to meet the awful test he had lived through before—in the words of his father. The current grew swifter. The roar deafening. Head up, eyes peering through the haze of a wave-chopped foreground, Tal fought desperately to miss a jutting rock, saw it whirl past alarmingly. Exerting his utmost strength, not daring for one brief moment to relax his desperate vigilance, he shot into roaring white water, dog paddling until destruction threatened, then trudgeoning with all he had. Only to see another danger loom ahead. It was awful. Demanding inhuman perception and endurance.

Hissing crash of rock-splintered water. Blinding, breath-taking sheets of spray. A submerged boulder swung the Kid around. The current caught him, whirling him over and over. Like a cork, he was tossed, whipped, buffeted. His mind blurred. He lost track of time, of events, of position and

of impending catastrophe. Lost also his interest in fighting. There was no place to start fighting. It was like trying to fight a plague of hornets.

Now he was drawn under water again as the rapids spewed him into a swift chute. His lungs cried out for air until they seemed about to burst. Doggedly Tal held to the foul, starved air. Then, when pain threatened to craze him, he let it slowly out.

Now the roaring seemed to die away. Was this death? Tal opened his eyes and gulped a life-giving breath. Strangely he was in fairly smooth water. And on top. Swimming weakly as the stream bore him on.

His clothes dragged him down. The treacherous swirls sucked at him damningly. Again he won to the top, filled his lungs. Ahead, a bouncing log loomed darkly—the one he had so narrowly missed when he hit the water. Could he make it?

With will-forced strokes, he swam after it. Fifty feet to gain. Where feet were miles. Forty feet. Thirty. He was gaining. But tired. Awful weary. Numb with chill. Sluggish. An unseen and treacherous suction drew him down again. When he came up, he'd lost ten precious feet. A groan burst from his blue lips as he flailed desperately to make it up.

Slowly he closed that gap. Fifteen feet. Ten. Five. He reached out for the tossing float, felt it rasp his fingers as he was jerked away again. It looked hopeless. With the last vestige of his failing strength, he hurled himself forward, grasped again, sank his fingers into the rough bark.

For a long time he trailed along, drawn by that float. Before he found strength enough to straddle it and lock his hands and feet beneath it. Then he lapsed into blessed unconsciousness.

Tal came alive. Numb, chilled, stiff. To find his float swirling aimlessly in a placid backbay. Lifting his eyes beyond the low bank, he caught the outlines of the sharp-roofed structures at Cowskin Crossing. Those buildings stirred into puny flame the faint spark that still glowed within him.

Easing his desperate grip, he fell off the log. He was in a foot and a half of water. On hands and knees he crawled to the bank, lay there long moments chafing life into his numbed limbs. The sun was up. The birds were singing. Tal wondered about the posse, found comfort that the morning peace was as yet undisturbed by the smash of guns.

Now Tal staggered up to reel crazily along the willow line that screened his movements from prying eyes at the saloon. Hatless. Bootless. Unarmed. And so he came, even as once before, to the kitchen door. Only this time without a prodding gun in his ribs. It was a picture that prodded him now. A picture of howling lawmen blasting life from a weary, wasted woman. The one named Violet.

He shoved open the door, stumbled inside. A coffee pot bubbled a cheerful tune on the hot stove, but the old woman was nowhere in evidence. Tal poured himself a steaming cup of the brew, drank it scalding hot, felt new life pulse in his veins. Putting the cup aside, he hearkened to the muted murmur of voices coming from the barroom, then tried a side door leading from the kitchen. It gave to his hand and he looked in.

"I've been expecting you, Tal."

"I shouldn't have been so long," he murmured contritely.

"What matter?" she whispered, with a caricature of a smile. "You are here. Did you fetch my ring?"

Tal nodded, reached the gold band from his pocket, slipped it on the third finger of her left hand. She sobbed, laid her lips against it.

"Thank God," she said softly. "My prayers are answered. I knew you wouldn't fail, Tal. Is Washita . . . is he . . .?"

"Dead!" admitted Tal.

Her eyes grew wide. "Dead," she whispered fearfully. "God. I prayed for that, too. That was very wrong." Silent, dry-eyed sobs shook her frail body.

From the hills rang a wild cry. Something swift and hard ripped into the shabby shake roof and the air suddenly shook with gun concussion. The woman, frightened, clung to Tal's sodden garments.

"They're here!" clipped the Kid. "We gotta get out of this. Come!"

But she was unequal to it. So, despite his own weakness, Tal lifted her, passed into the kitchen and so out of the old log saloon. Behind them lifted the excited cries of the renegades left to guard the crossing. Tal knew some might come into the kitchen. In that case . . .

In desperation, he shouldered the frail woman he carried, lurched swiftly toward the freshly budding willows at the creek. How light she was. How wasted. There was a chance if they weren't discovered by those in the saloon. For the posse were still hidden behind the willows.

At the half-way mark the Kid was faltering. At three-quarters he was forced to lower her, to hold her as she tried to help him. And so they stumbled to the very edge of their covert before the first shot came . . . from behind. And a miracle happened. The bullet passed between their closely pressed bodies. Out of the red hell a marshal's posse unleased, as they cleansed for all time the festering sore that had been Cowskin Crossing.

When the echoes of the last shot were stilled, when the pyre of the burning log buildings painted the azure sky with crimson tongues and gloomy smoke etchings, a tattered scarecrow came reeling into the open, half leading, half supporting the broken crone who had once been the toast of the rangeland.

They watched that strange pair come, those lawmen, not knowing how to read such sign. And as they watched, another cavalcade swept in from Flat Top Butte—the other half of Jeff Dixon's posse. The lawmen who had wiped out the vengeance lusting crew that had roared at Tal as he leaped. Leading that troop was Old Jeff. Riding stirrup to stirrup with him was his heart-sick niece, Violet.

Those two saw the tottering pair emerge from the willows at the same instant. Jeff Dixon rumbled a curse, steeled his pony cruelly. The girl's cry was torn from her soul as she recognized Tal. She followed her uncle. They reined in together, lit running, raced up to Tal and his withered burden. Jeff's face was working.

"Great God, Tal!" he boomed. "I saw you jump, boy. Right offa Flat Top. A plumb fool stunt. I give you up, figgerin' no man could do it an' live. How come?"

"I had a hen on," smiled Tal, wearily. "At Cowskin Crossin'."

In the crook of his right arm, the little old lady peered brokenly at Jeff, trembling beneath his stare.

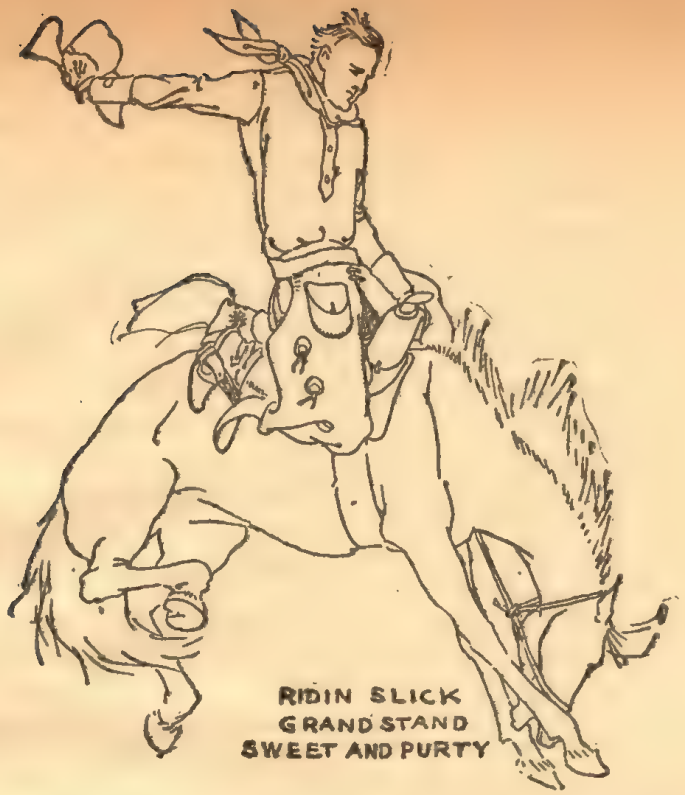
"Jeff!" she cried, weakly. "Jeff!" And then, wonderingly. "Tal, I don't believe Jeff knows me."

"Who's this?" snapped the cowman.

"This," answered Tal, with a touch of scorn, "is the woman you doubted. The woman of Cowskin Crossin'. Not the bad one you claimed, but the queen of the J Lazy D!"

"Violet!" cried Jeff Dixon, and it sounded like someone had knifed him. In a bound he had cleared the gap, folded the strange little woman to his breast.

Tal rides his thousand hills, ruling the J Lazy D firmly but kindly. Bringing joy to Old Jeff, who long ago turned the spread over to him. Making life a song for his two Violets of the J Lazy D—the withered Violet who finds in the present compensation for the past, and the younger, blooming Violet, who hails Tal as her lord.



HORSE-SENSE

By

JAY J. KALEZ

Some Startling Tricks Of An Old Horse-Trader

Old "Shout-along" Simmons was about the smartest horse-trader that ever whittled, to my way of thinkin'. Shout-along, hit our range one winter, broke flatter than soup on a saucer and talked his way into the feed-crew for his keep 'till Chinook time. Come spring, he started out with a broken-bladed jack-knife and shoe-leather enough to carry him about to town. We didn't see hide nor hair of him for six months, but when he showed up again, he was drivin' a team of high-checked blacks hitched to a town buggy with a wife and two kids holdin' down the back seat. Now that's what I call horse-tradin'.

Shout-along knew more about horseflesh than the average hand knows about the inside of his shirt pocket. Horse breakin' was his trade but he had the knack of judgin' horseflesh, down to the point where he could spot cash on the hoof quicker than a stud dealer can spot a crimped deck.

Jed Brown had a fancy stallion over at his stable corrals that was too mean to get within pole-distance of. Jed picked the stallion up on a trade, figurin' he could get some wild ranny to top him kinda rough-like and knock a little sense into his ornery head. A couple of the boys had their lungs jarred loose or their ribs kicked in tryin'

it and after that, Jed's standing offer of twenty-five dollars for the work became more of a joke than the greenhorn, snipe-huntin'-party tomfoolery.

Shout-along heard about the stallion and taking the best mare he had in his corral over to Jed's stable, he offered to bet Jed the mare against the outlaw horse that he could take the stallion at sun-up and that by sun-down, his oldest kid would ride the animal over to Jed's stable with a five-gallon oil can tied to its tail and an umbrella wavin' over its head.

Jed like to broke his neck gettin' witnesses to the bet and four stable hands like to have did the same thing gettin' the stallion over to Shout-along's corrals.

Now Shout-along's gone the way of all horse - traders and I'm not breakin' my word by tellin' this trick and a few others the old fox showed me. Some people hang round horses all their life and still don't know any more about 'em than to say "Whoa" and "Giddap." A horse reasons by seeing, hearing and feeling. The only way he understands words of command is by associating them with the action that follows. Once that association is drilled through his thick skull, he reasons no further. Once, for instance, a horse is halter-broke, it makes no difference if he's tied to his stall with an inch-rope or a piece of thin string, he stands there until some-one comes along and turns him loose.

SIDEWIND

That's like over in the Saltese Basin. Bink Hawkins, on the Bar 88, had a trick horse he traded half a corral full of feeders for. That horse could do everything but sign its name. Bink kept it in a box stall with a sort of barred-gate across the entrance. Bink had the animal trained so that when he whistled it would lift the catch on the gate with its teeth and come to wherever he was waiting. The animal seemed a darned - sight smarter than some of the moss - back hands he kept around the place.

One summer, Bink was cuttin' a few head out of a creek bottom and a bald - faced steer shoved a horn into the animal's shoulder. Bink took care of the gore and then thought he'd turn the horse out on the range till the wound healed. The horse would show up at the ranch house every few days or so for a feed of grain, but finally a week went by and no horse. Bink started lookin' and still no horse. Finally, he turned the whole crew loose on the hunt. They found Bink's horse all right but it wasn't even fit for crow bait by then. Not with the temperature about a hundred in the shade and the bot-flies thicker than trail dust.

Bink's horse had gone inside a deserted squatter's cabin evidently huntin' shade and while it was in there the cabin door had

blown shut. That cabin door would have pushed open a darn-sight easier than the barred gate on its box stall at the home ranch ever opened, but there mister horse stayed and fought flies until he dropped from thirst, all because there was no whistle from Bink to set it at its gate opening trick.

Course, some of you old saddle-squatters are gonna just bob your head at that one and say, "Sure, that's the way a horse is built." Well, here's some more about the way a horse is built that a dollar to a doughnut you never figured made any, never-mind.

You probably know that by hitting a horse on top of the head, just behind its ears, you can knock him down as easy with your fist as you can with a fence-post maul. At the front part of the atlas bone or first joint of the backbone, where it goes into the occipital bone or back part of the head, about an inch of the spinal cord is not covered with bone. That's where the old range trick of "creasing" a wild horse comes in. A bullet just nicking the hide at that spot will drop a horse out cold as the smack of a milk-cow's hoof to the jaw. When mister horse comes to he comes to groggy and weak. You can have him home and through the branding chutes before he remembers he's supposed to be wild and woolly.

Well, therein also lies one of the tricks of the professional horse tamer. A length of rope—about clothes-line thickness, to you tenderfoots—is taken and a loop tossed over mister horse's head to cinch down about the middle of his neck. Then, the rope is run from the neck loop, into the horse's mouth over its tongue, bit-fashion and on up the other side of his head to cross and come down the opposite jaw, just back of his ears. That brings it across the unprotected spot on his backbone. About three or four wraps are made alongside the first wrap, through the mouth and across the head behind the ears. Then the rope is drawn tight in the same manner as drawing a saddle cinch up tight. However, right here is where knowing your business comes in. Too tight, and your horse may turn out crow-bait. Too loose, and if mister horse is a real outlaw, you may be crow-bait yourself.

The horse-psychology of the thing is, mister outlaw horse suddenly finds himself in mental distress. He may fight a bit but with no relief, he uses common horse-sense and reasons that the man handling him put that distress into his head, therefore the same man can remove it. It's like a bad gun-hand gettin' full of red-eye whiskey and then all of a sudden gettin' sick. One minute he's lookin' for someone to knock out from under his J. B. and the next minute he's lookin' for someone to steady him to the waterin' trough.

Well, anyway, that's what old Shout-along did with Jed Brown's outlaw stallion.

After we got that "War Bridle" on him, he kicked up corral-dust for about ten minutes and about then the horse-sense started to work. Shout-along went into the corral with a pitch-fork handle and started in by pattin' mister outlaw around his ticklish spots. The stallion never moved. It wasn't another ten minutes till Shout-along was pattin' with his hands. An hour and we had the brute with a saddle on, leading him around the corral and standin' for more handlin' than a bucket-fed calf. Each time Shout-along tried something new, he slacked off on the wraps of rope around the animal's head.

Each time mister outlaw allowed Shout-along to touch him or pat him, he got a little relief from the mental distress the rope behind his ears was causing. That's all it needed was horse-sense, to know the more he behaved the more that mental distress was gonna disappear. By sun-down that stallion could have doubled for a merry-go-round pony. Shout-along walked up the street to Jed Brown's stable with his youngest kid in the saddle, wavin' his wife's silk umbrella and with a wash-tub draggin' from its tail. Jed took one look and offered to trade his stable, lock, stock and barrel, for a sheep ranch.

Now, just for the benefit of some of you wild buckaroos that think that method is worse than rakin' a fear-crazed cayuse with spurs and havin' him buck his own guts out along with yours, here is another trick of old Shout-along's.

This is an old Indian trick and anyone that's ever been on the Comanche reservation probably has seen it worked. It's simple as sleeping on a load of hay and takes no skill other than a little more sense than the animal it's tried on.

A good strong halter is placed on the horse, along with a double lead rope. One of the lead ropes is knotted in the horse's tail and its head drawn to one side about half-way to its belly. Then the horse is turned around and around for about five minutes by the other lead rope. The motion acts the same on a horse as it does on a human. The horse gets dizzy as a fool. It's in mental distress and its horse-sense tells it the man at the halter end is the cause. It allows that man to do whatever he wishes to it, just as any human, too dizzy to stand alone, would allow himself to be supported by his worst enemy. The horse admits the man is boss and as horse-sense goes, from then on anything that wears pants is boss.

Course now, I'm not tryin' to take the glory out of bronc bustin'. Those galoots that slide into leather from the top of the chutes and ride 'em loose fer hell or dust, are artists. They're balancing in that saddle just like a tight-rope walker balances on what looks like nothin'. Those hombres are

born not made. But let me ask you this, did you ever see one of 'em live to be old enough to get gray behind the ears? Not many. A few seasons of bronc bustin' and if their brains aren't scrambled, their lungs are, or their kidneys are the foot-loose kind that get tangled in their inners.

The whole idea of bronc bustin' and horse breakin' is the same to show the horse who's boss. How you do it is just like how you skin a cat. After the skin's off nobody can tell. Like Zek Olson over on Thief River. Zek had a team of ornery bays balk with him when he was on the way home with a load of hay. Zek was a religious sort of fella that didn't go in fer cussin' much, but he petted and pounded that team till he'd just about forgot all his religion. Finally, he decided to burn a ball of tumble-weed under the balking team. He rolled under a couple of heaps and touched a match. That balkin' pair of bays, the minute the flames started cracklin', took about four steps forward and then stopped. When Zek saw that and then saw the tumble-weed flames lick up into his load of feed, he let go with a string of cuss words that would of done any mule-skinner proud. Only thing was, when he started cussin' he was kickin' at the burnin' tumble weeds instead of hanging on to his reins.

With Zek's first blast of cuss words, that team laid back their ears and the way they went, burning load of feed and all. Zek never set eyes on them again 'till he walked the eight miles on into home. There he found his barn burning for allmighty, with the bays standing peacefully by, only a neck-yoke between them, watching. They'd taken that burning load of hay right into the barn yard and dumped it and the rack over right alongside the barn. Zek took the short end of a trade the next day but his excuse was, it was either sacrifice the bays or his religion. They were cuss broke.

About a horse balking, here's two simple tricks that used a few times will usually break any horse of the habit. One is to tie up one front leg for about fifteen minutes, leaving the animal stand on three legs. The other is to blindfold the horse and let him stand for about ten minutes. Then remove the blindfold, ease him to right and left a few times and start him. If either of those two methods fail, the trick just explained of making a horse dizzy by tying its head to its tail and turning it around and around, will always work.

But balking isn't the worst bit of orneryness that a horse can work on a man. About the worst piece of downright meanness a horse can use, is not to stand to a ground-hitch or to bolt the minute it finds itself rein free. Once over at the Nespelem Indian celebration, Charley Mallory top-hand for the Tipped T outfit, got all heated up over a horse race and let his gamblin' sense get the best of his horse-sense. Charley had a roping horse he thought more of than he did his right eye. However, Charley thought he had a sure thing and staked his horse against a poke of cash and lost the animal, hands down, to a flashy dressed cow-hand that just drifted onto the range.

Once in the saddle, the flashy dressed stranger knew he'd picked up a cow-horse that was a cow-horse. He refused every offer Charley made to buy the animal back and was gettin' ready to hit the trail on south when old Shout-along came along. Charley told Shout-along his trouble and Shout-along just winked one eye and looked wise. He went over and talked a few minutes to Sheriff Pugh's kid and then walked over to where the flashy dressed hand was displaying his horse.

"I wouldn't take that bull-headed cayuse as a gift," Shout-along boomed out so the cow-hand could overhear. "Not unless I had a hankerin' fer walkin'."

The cow-hand called Shout-along. "Sure he's a good cow-horse," Shout-along agreed, "but wait till he can see you with both eyes and knows his head's free. You can't get within shoutin' distance of him."

The cow-hand immediately started to try the animal out. He dismounted and droppin' the reins on to the ground walked away. Then he turned around and started back towards the horse. About that time Shout-along raised one hand to scratch his head and Charley's horse like to have tangled up his feet boltin' for clear ground. The flashy stranger tried to come up from the other side. Every time he'd get within a dozen feet of Charley's horse the animal would bolt. Finally darned if he didn't have to borrow a rope to bring the brute in.

He was so mad he started out lookin' for Charley, ready for a fight. The boys finally got the thing settled and Charley got his roping horse back for twenty-five dollars. However, it cost him another ten to have Shout-along break the animal of the trick and a dollar besides that, to pay the sheriff's kid for poppin' the animal with his air gun every time Shout-along raised his hand to scratch his head.

Teachin' a horse to stand ground-hitched and to let himself be approached even when he's without saddle and bridle, is something that takes a lot of horse understanding along with patience and kindness. A horse has a memory like an elephant for anything that hurts him and the same kind of memory for every thing that pleases him. I've seen fellows walk up to a horse that's willing to let himself be caught in the pasture, flop a saddle on to him, jerk on a bridle, then hit leather and dig spurs without as much as giving the animal a friendly pat for being gentle. Next time that hombre tried to walk up to that horse he probably wonders why the animal bolts and hits for the high places.

To teach a horse to ground-hitch, saddle him up and lead him to where you've got a good solid stake drove into the ground. Now, before you ride out to the stake, take your lariat and put the loop around the animal's body just back of the fore-legs so the loop cinches down from the ground side. When you climb down out of your saddle, take a couple of quick hitches on to your ground stake with your rope before you drop your reins. Then, walk away. If, when you approach again, mister horse starts to back up, the reins drag a few feet and then the rope around his body starts to tighten down. A few feels of that and the horse-sense starts to work. Mister horse figures it out that as long as he stands that rope won't cinch up his middle, so he starts standing. A few pats on the neck and a little nose rubbing each time he stands and soon you could fire a cannon under his belly and he wouldn't move.

Now to teach a horse so you can walk up to him when he's bridle free in a pasture or corral. The easiest way to teach that trick, is what looks like the hardest way. Again, put your loop just back of the fore-

legs so the rope cinches from the bottom and runs out through his fore-legs. Now turn the animal loose but hang on to the end of the rope. Let the animal feed a while, then walk with the rope in your hand to as near a distance as he will allow.

If you want to teach the animal to come when his name is called, start calling it, givin' a slight tug on the rope each time. If you want to teach him to come at a whistle, do the same thing when you whistle. Be gentle and patient and allow the animal to take his own time in responding to the rope tugs, but working yourself closer with each tug. When you get up to his nose, don't try to catch him. Just reward him with a piece of apple or sugar and then walk away to try it again.

Follow that method for a week or so before you go to pattin' him and scratchin' his neck. Then, when you have him so he will come to you, expectin' a reward of some kind, start to bridling him before you give him his piece of apple or sugar. Later saddle him first. Use patience and horse-sense yourself and in time you'll have him so that at sound of your whistle, he'll come to you at a gallop. One thing, always reward him with something. That's what he comes to you for. Don't trick him or he'll trick you.

I guess the ambition of every cow-hand is to have a horse that will do a few tricks and show off for the rest of the outfit when the chance comes up. Teachin' a horse fancy tricks is just another matter of patience and horse-sense. One thing most people never learn about a horse. It's easier to teach a horse to respond by sign than it is by command. I guess that's because a horse has more brains by sight than by ear. In teaching a horse fancy tricks, it's best to teach them to work by sign. Not only does that make the trick look more difficult but it makes it so the horse will do the trick only for you or someone that knows the signs.

Say now, you want to teach a horse to answer any question by nodding or shaking his head, "Yes" or "No." Take a thin stick, say the butt of a whip about three or four foot long. Fasten a pin in the end of the stick so you can hold the thing in your hand and be standing a few foot clear of the animal when you stick him with the pin. Now stand sort of in front and at an angle from the horse and talk to him a minute to get his attention. Then, by some signal like lifting your free arm, bending forward with your body or lifting your one leg, jab him lightly on one side of the neck, just above the shoulder, until he shakes his head. Immediately stop and reward and pat him. Then repeat. Do this until at your sign signal of a bow or lifted arm he shakes his head. That's the "No" trick.

For the "Yes" trick use the same method with a different signal, such as a lift of your hat of a slap of your leg, pricking the animal with the pin right on the back of his neck until he bobs his head. Then reward and pat him. Patience and gentleness with this and you will have the animal so that at a lift of your arm he will shake his head for "No" and as a slap of your hand to your leg, he will bob his head for "Yes." The reward of the trick is a barrel of fun. Ask any question of the horse you want and then signal the answer you want, "Yes" or "No." To those lookin' on, the horse gets credit for understanding the question you ask or anyone else asks.

Another good trick, is to have your horse so when any one but yourself tries to get in the saddle, he'll buck until you tell him it's all right to let the person ride. This trick can be worked in a dozen ways. The simplest way is to use a signal that will work without you being present. For instance, in teaching the horse to buck make the signal a folding of the corner of the saddle blanket under. Or a running of the hand under the saddle blanket always before mounting. Here's the trick.

Place a sharp burr or a pin through the

fold of the saddle blanket, so that with pressure on the saddle stirrup the burr or pin sticks the animal in the back. Then with just the pressure of the hand for the pin or burr to stick, work the animal until at the feel of pressure to cause pain, it bucks. Instantly stop the pain and pat the animal, straightening the lump in the blanket fold. Then, pat with the smooth blanket on the back.

Repeat this, first with the blanket fold tucked up under the saddle and then smooth, until you have the animal so it will buck at the least pressure under a folded saddle blanket. Next, start gettin' into the saddle and then tucking the blanket fold under, at the same time pushing under the burr or pin. At the first buck, allow yourself to go out of the saddle as if the buck had thrown you. Patience at this and the horse will reach the stage where no one can mount him as long as the corner of the saddle blanket is tucked under the saddle or until your hand has been run under the saddle. Either signal can be used, only one thing, the trick can be spoiled forever by letting some one ride the horse out despite the tucked under blanket.

GRAB THE BISCUIT

That's what horse-sense is, and as I started to say in this yarn, I never knew a man that understood it more than old Shout-along Simmons. Shout-along made his livin' at it, and while he might have had a lot of explainin' to give out on some of his trades when he came up before the pearly gates, he probably had a good excuse for every question.

Like one time, Shout-along got a hold of a black mare, as pretty a piece of horseflesh as ever walked, but blind as a posthole. Shout-along groomed the horse all up and one day tried to sell it to a cattle buyer that drifted into town.

Shout-along took the cattle buyer to his barn and for a half an hour used his sales talk while the animal stood hitched in its stall. He'd bragged the animal up so high that when the cattle buyer pulled out his roll of cash and offered to buy, but first wanted to see the animal trot across the barn-yard, Shout-along knew he couldn't refuse and hold face around the town. He therefore decided to trust to luck, and taking the blind mare from the stall, turned her loose in the yard.

The mare started across the yard, plowed its way through some raspberry bushes, rammed against a tree and finally stumbled into the creek. The cattle-buyer watched and with plenty of fire in his eye, whirled on Shout-along.

"What kind of a deal you tryin' to pull on me?" the cattle-buyer demanded. "That mare's blind. Blind as a bat."

"Blind," old Shout-along came back with all the injured dignity in the world. "That horse ain't blind. No, mister. You jest don't know horseflesh. That's one of these kinda horses that jest don't give a damn."

"I see you som'where biffore, eh, Señor?"

OUTLAW'S PRICE

By
HAPSBURG LIEBE

No Man Knows What An Outlaw's Price May Be. Sometimes It's Only A Song—A Six-Gun Song

"I fine you, Joey Allison," droned Cottonwood City's old justice of the peace, "ten dollars, with the alternative of spending ten days in jail. You were much too free with your fists. It wasn't quite so bad, your knocking down the proprietor of the Gold Standard Saloon; but when you floored Dane Howie's chief deputy—"

He broke off with a frown. He was four-square, this "Judge" Lingley, but the vast country west of the Pecos was a little new to him as yet. Joey Allison, top-hand cowboy, twenty-two, slender, with slate-gray eyes that now were smouldering, placed a five and five ones on the desk.

"Sorry I had to do it, Judge. Both of 'em said somethin' to me that made me blind mad." He threw a defiant glance toward Chief Deputy Sam Greet, and went on; "I take it I've got a right to talk to you as man to man. If I have, Judge, will you please send that bullet-headed gorilla outside?"

Sam Greet beetled. He *was* built a good deal like a gorilla, and he *was* bullet-

headed. Lingley caught his eye, motioned with a thumb, and the deputy stalked out to the hot and dusty main street. Low-voiced, Joey proceeded:

"Judge, you prob'ly know that my daddy, killed some years ago, was an outlaw—not that I ever heard o' him doin' anything the least bit dirty, you understand—but you don't know how hard I've tried to live down the bad name he left me. It sure has been hell. Nobody much was willin' to believe I meant it. I worked like a dog on the range. Didn't even carry a gun. Didn't gamble. Didn't drink. I'd went into the Gold Standard to buy a bag o' smokin' tobacco, sence no other place in town had any, which is how come I was there.

"Well, that's that, and here's somethin' else. Old Sheriff Dane Howie is a fine man, but he made a mistake in takin' Sam Greet on as a deputy. Sam bein' a ex-bandit, Dane figgered it took a thief to catch a thief—yeah, I'm right about that—and the Rio Santos gang o' stickups and rustlers and smugglers had Dane up a tall tree. They still have, for Greet ain't done anything worth mentionin'!"

Lingley said nothing. Joey Allison continued:

"But that's not what I most wanted to tell you, Judge. You've always been nice to me, and even just now you only fined me ten pesos when you could easy 'a' stuck me for fifty. If I'm kicked into the trail my daddy died on, you'll know why it was. That's all, Judge. So long!"

He turned to go. Old Lingley stopped him. "One minute, Joey. What was it Sam Greet and the saloon-keeper said that made you so mad?"

Young Allison's eyes hardened, glinted. "Well, as you know, I guess, my daddy was nicknamed Wildcat—Wildcat Allison. Sam Greet and Henry Farr called me—Wildcat's Kitten."

With that he was gone. He hurried across the street and to his blaze-faced bay cow horse. Standing in the front doorway of the Gold Standard off to his left, was Bish Morang, ace gambler, watching him speculatively; he was to remember this later. Allison flicked the bay's rein over its head and swung up to the saddle. At that instant, Sam Greet appeared as though out of nowhere.

"You," growled the deputy. "I'm servin' you notice right now to keep out o' town. Do you get that, Kitten, or must I say it with bullets?"

Joey went a clean white under his tan. "Easy to talk thataway when you've got a gun on and I ain't. Well, the next time you see me, mebbe you'll have a chance to say it with bullets. Think it's a language I don't savvy? Yeah, I reckon you do, because I ain't been luggin' any hardware the last year or so. Let me leave this with you, feller: I cut my teeth on the barrel of a Colt forty-five, and I've still got that same gun."

He rode off up the street boiling inside. Kitten—again. Not that be blamed his ill-starred father even slightly in connection with this hated new nickname. There were bad men, and good bad men, and Wildcat Allison belonged in the latter class; he was an aristocrat of his kind. Too red-blooded, too courageous, too quick to resent wrong. He had been shot in the back, and that had not ceased to be a thorn in the heart of his lone son.

After having told his ranchman employer that there wasn't any mail, Joey said: "I'll be leavin' you for good in three days, I guess."

"What? But top-hand riders is as scarce—"

"I'll be leavin' you Wednesday," Joey said.

Five days passed. Stuffy, breathless night settled over hill and range and town. Henry Farr's Gold Standard Saloon had its usual evening crowd of cowboys, miners, townsmen, and Border riffraff. The back

door opened, and Joey Allison eased through. He now wore blue serge, a black sateen shirt, black Stetson and black boots, his best clothing; across his partially buttoned vest was draped a heavy gold watch-chain.

Allison closed the door softly, and ran his gaze over the hilarious crowd. There were many whom he knew, more whom he did not know. Suddenly his attention settled upon a rear corner. There at a small table sat Bish Morang, premier gambler, and Deputy Sam Greet, talking over their glasses. Morang had on his customary expensive clothing, which, together with his eternally suave manner, was responsible for the pseudonym, Bishop. The deputy's attire was cheap and flashy.

Then Greet and the gambler looked around to see Joey Allison standing within two yards of them. The worn walnut handle of an old six-gun was visible under one side of the newcomer's blue coat. They noted also the showy watch-chain. Morang's dark face remained masklike. Greet laughed.

"What time is it, Kitten?"

"Time to say it with bullets," Joey snapped, "so get up from there and go to it —if you feel lucky, sidewinder!"

The deputy blinked, swore, rose unleathering steel. Allison's Colt fairly leaped out of its holster and became stationary less than a foot from Sam Greet's stomach. Greet froze with his ivory-handled gun at a forty-five degree angle, and went ashen.

"Fast—eh?" he growled.

"Bish Morang saw that you went for iron first," Allison said, his voice granite-hard. "I've got a clear right to kill you, sidewinder, but mebbe I'll pass it up if you'll lay your purty gun on the table there and then 'vaporate through that window right behind you. Well—what about it?"

This was a wholly new Joe Allison. He had familiar burning eyes, and a familiar set countenance. They were those of his outlaw sire, whom Greet had known very well indeed. The deputy put his gun on the table.

"I needed another hog-leg," Allison said, snatching the weapon up. "The window now, Sam, and don't come back too soon!"

Both guns threatened. Sam Greet turned, crept through the window, vanished in the night. Allison made his way swiftly to the front of the saloon. The owner of the place, Henry Farr, an angular and hard-visaged man of forty, stood behind the cash register. He took a cigar from between his yellowed teeth and stared as though at an apparition. Joey addressed him in tones that carried to every ear in that big, barnlike frame structure.

"Know who I am, Henry? Think I'm Joe Allison, don't you? Well, I ain't—not any more. You and a bunch o' other people—hell of a lot o' other people—just simply wouldn't let me behave myself. So I ain't goin' to disappoint you. From now on I'm the Wildcat's Kitten, and listen to my squall!"

Instantly he began to shoot with both hands. Almost in the same brief second of time, there was the crashing of the back bar mirror, a tall stack of glasses, a broad pyramid of fancily-labeled bottles. Henry Farr and his bartender had dropped out of sight, and Farr was yelling lustily for Sam Greet. Allison then ducked under the swirling powder smoke and swept the room with his fiery gaze. Most of the Gold Standard patrons were flat on the floor, many were under tables.

"Listen to my squall—me, the Wildcat's Kitten!"

He shot two of the hanging oil lamps out, and turned swiftly toward the back doorway and his horse. But a weapon blazed in the darkness just beyond the main entrance, and Joey sank into an abyss of total oblivion. Sam Greet had returned too soon—with a thirty-eight that

he was wont to carry concealed in an armpit holster under his coat!

"Nice kitty, won't scratch now," the deputy laughed, rushing to the prostrate, motionless blue-clad figure.

He caught up the guns that Allison had dropped, hastily ran one hand over Joey's clothing and satisfied himself that there wasn't a third weapon. Over the big room men were going to their feet and coming toward him. Greet ordered two townsmen to carry his prisoner to the squat building that housed the office of old Sheriff Dane Howie and the cells of the county jail. The job finished, he sent the two away and closed the street door after them.

Allison was unconscious for but a few minutes. His senses came back with a rush; he remembered everything clearly the moment his eyelids flickered open. The fingers that he put to the left side of his head came away red and sticky. Bum shot! He saw that he lay on a floor near a desk, and he recognized the desk as the sheriff's. Back of it sat a man. It was not Dane Howie, but the jailer; old Dane had gone home for the night. Joey then looked upward and into the heavy, triumphant face of Deputy Sam Greet, ex-bandit.

Greet held his ivory-handled six-gun ready. He had placed Joey's old Colt on the nearby desk. The armpit thirty-eight lay beside it.

"I made a mistake," Allison said, "in not drillin' you when I had the right. Next time it'll be different, sidewinder."

"There won't be any next time," gritted the deputy, "because you'll be behind iron bars. Get up and get yourself into a cell, Kitten, pronto!"

Allison rose from the unswept floor. He staggered a little at first, but soon regained his equilibrium. Again Sam Greet noticed the showy gold watch-chain. Allison reached into his lower left vestpocket as though to note the time.

On the end of the chain there was not a watch, but a stubby forty-one caliber derringer—and Joey brought it out aimed squarely at the chief deputy's heart!

"Don't you move a finger, Greet. You cain't shoot any quicker'n I can and damn well you know it. Now drop that hog-leg—and don't you get in between me and that jailer!"

Once more Dane Howie's illy chosen underling found himself staring into hard slate-gray eyes that were exactly like those of the fast-shooting, square-shooting terror that had been called Wildcat. The ivory-handled gun fell with a clatter.

"I had a ace in the hole too, didn't I?"

"There Won't Be Any Next Time!"

Joey's grin was narrow. He side-stepped to the desk, picked up his own gun, noted that the jailer was not armed. He ordered with a snap: "You, put the keys on the desk there. I hope I won't have to kill you, but—"

The jail keys rattled on the desk. Joey Allison, the Wildcat's Kitten, marched both jailer and deputy to a cell and locked them in.

"Now start yellin' after I go, and I'm li'ble to do some shootin' through that window over there. Don't start yellin', and mebbe I'll save you bein' laughed at by the whole town. You get me?"

Neither of the two said anything. Allison darted back into the sheriff's office, tossed the ring of keys to the desk and picked up Greet's big gun. He stepped through the street doorway and spied the form of a tall man outlined dimly at a corner of the building. The fellow spoke in a low voice:

"It's me, kid. Bish Morang. I want to talk with you."

Joey approached him belligerently. "You hornin' into this, Bishop?"

"No, kid." Morang backed away to deeper shadows, and the younger man followed closely. "I watched through a window, kid. That derringer trick was cute, all right. I meant to saw some cell-window bars and get you out, but you saved me the trouble. Now leather that gun, won't you?"

Allison suddenly remembered a whisper to the effect that Bish Morang had a connection with the notorious old Rio Santos gang, and did not holster the Colt. Morang shrugged in the near darkness, and went on:

"So you've taken the step at last. But you can't get far by yourself, son. Lone men never do. Why not join an outfit that knows its business, and make a barrel of money easy?"

"The Santos bunch?" So the whisper had been true. "Not me, Bish."

"You're no better than your daddy was, are you?"

"Not on your life. I—"

"Well," very suavely cut in Morang, "Wildcat Allison belonged to that outfit. In fact, he was the kingpin, though I'll admit I was the one who did most of the thinking and planning. I still do. It's hard to find out the right kind of hombre, and that's why I want you with us. There's not so much danger. If the law closes in, all you have to do is to step across the Border and into Mexico. Interested; eh? I thought you'd be. Now listen:

"A short distance this side of the Line, on the west bank of the Santos, there's what is left of a small old gold town that was named Badger. The gang is holed up there for the present. Ask to see Bill Redington, tell him who you are and that I sent you; tell him also that I'll be down to talk big new business with him right away. Maybe you know how to get to Badger?"

"Yeah," slowly, "I know. Say, Bish. I noticed that you and Sam Greet seemed purty thick. Does that sidewinder belong to your outfit?"

Morang chuckled. "He certainly does not. I was only trying to find out some things, kid."

Allison nodded toward the building close at his right. "The cell keys is on the desk in there. After I've been gone a few minutes, s'pose you happen in and turn them jiggers loose? It'd put you in stronger with Greet, and help you find out—whatever it is you want to know; wouldn't it?"

"Young hombre, you've got a head on you!" Bish Morang exclaimed guardedly. *"Hasta luego!"*

Joey hurried through the darkness and to his horse, soon was in the saddle and riding southward. Before long he began to feel the weight of the thing he was doing. As the miles slipped under the nimble heels of his bay, it became heavier. He really had wished to be a worthwhile citizen. Damn such people as Henry Farr and Sam Greet! If only they'd let him behave himself—but they wouldn't.

Although a barren and exceedingly rocky range of hills lay in between Cottonwood Valley and all that was left of the "ghost" town, Allison completed his journey before midnight. He watered his horse at a pool in the half-dry Santos, then rode into the single street. On either side of him time-wrecked wooden shanties and adobe huts showed dimly in the pale star radiance. Ahead loomed an ancient, sun-blasted frame building of one story, with only a corner and part of the roof caved in, a combination of saloon and dancehall.

This, of course, would be the outlaws' hangout. Joey drew his horse up before the main entrance, hallooed softly, had no response. Only through extreme caution had the band survived for so long; Bill

Redington—which was an alias—should have a sentinel somewhere. Wondering, Joey dismounted and tied the bay to a warped old hitch-rail, then strode into the building. He scratched a match and held the tiny flame above his head. Swiftly he noted the dusty bar, a few dusty chairs and tables. On the floor near the rear wall lay half a dozen blankets.

Evidently Redington and the others were out on a raid of one kind or another. Allison, weary now, promptly rolled himself in one of the blankets and went off to sleep. He woke at sunrise to see six hard-faced, unshaven, slit-eyed men, each of them carrying two holstered six-guns, just bringing up at a point a few feet away.

He rose, grinning a little. "Whichever one o' you is Bill Redington," he drawled —"Bish Morang said you needed me, and sent me to you. Wildcat Allison was my daddy. In other words, I'm the Wildcat's Kitten; yeah, and I'm sure braggin' about it. Bish'll be down here right soon, I was to tell you."

Five of them were lanky and dark. One was reddish of complexion, hair, and stubbly beard, and built a good deal like Deputy Sam Greet—very broad of shoulder, long-armed, round-headed, with the pale-blue eyes of a born killer. He flashed a narrow but eloquent glance toward the man nearest him, and spoke to the newcomer.

"I'm Bill Redington, kid. So yo're old Wildcat Allison's son. Hope you've got the nerve yore daddy had, but doubt it like hell." Indicating his companions: "Them two there is the Okell brothers; here's Fonso Peters and Spades Herron; this'n is Dallas Slim. We've all been down to San Carlos under the Border, havin' us a big time in the cantina there; I mean, this is s'posed to be the reason we went."

Bill Redington paused. His countenance showed that he was thinking fast and hard. Then he continued:

"But what we wanted, kid, was to bring a Mex dandy named Sanquebel—a *bandito* who plays a lone hand—up here and sweat him until he told where he hid a sackful o' cash money which he took from a certain bank last week about fifteen minutes before we meant to stick it up ourselves."

"Beat you to it," muttered Joey.

"You said it, Kitten. We was so hot on his trail that he had to hide the loot, but we couldn't find it. He ain't been back in that section. That's a purty ivory-handled gun you got there, kid, ain't it?"

Joey told, frankly, how he'd come by the weapon. Again Redington favored Dallas Slim with a narrow but eloquent glance. He went on:

"Son, you arrived here jist in time. Y'see, Mario Sanquebel knows us, and keeps out o' our way. But he don't know you. And it'll be a good thing to try you out on. You'll likely find the Mex in a back room of that cantina tonight, gamblin' or ready to gamble. Tackle him for a game, flashin' a roll; insist on playin' with only him and you in the room. Watch yore chance, slug him with a gun-barrel—but don't kill him—sneak through the back door with him and bring him here to us. You got it, Wildcat's Kitten?"

"Seems simple enough," Joey said.

He looked downward and at the toes of his dusty boots. Turning outlaw was more unattractive than ever now. If he hadn't already taken the step—but he had.

Allison rode into San Carlos a little after nightfall, and found the cantina readily. After having ground-anchored his horse in the darkness behind the big, flat adobe building, he stole around to the front and entered, ambled along the edge of the dance floor and stopped at the bar. A swarthy bartender bobbed up to ask in broken English what the señor would have to drink.

"Ain't drinkin'." The señor carelessly displayed a wad of banknotes that represented his savings for three years. "But

mebbe I wouldn't mind gamblin' some. Anybody here that ain't in the tin-horn class?"

"*Espero*—wait," the swarthy one said, and vanished.

He returned after a few minutes, and directed Allison to a small back room. Alone in there at a table, idly smoking a cigarette, sat Mario Sanquebel, the gambler and bandit. Mario was about thirty-five, darkly handsome, dressed flawlessly according to the Mexican standard. He smiled; fine white teeth glistened in the lamplight.

"So you weesh to play the cards?" waving a hand toward a chair across the table from him. "Then have the seat, please, Señor."

Joey grinned, nodded, and turned to bolt the door. "So that we won't be interrupted," he said, facing Sanquebel again.

To his amazement, he found himself looking into the barrels of two double-action Colt thirty-eights, which had appeared just above the farther edge of the table.

"I can consider myself stuck up, eh?" said Joey, still grinning.

"You theenk I am loco?" The dandified Mexican's gleaming smile was gone. His dark eyes were filled with fire. "Joost now I have the hunch, as you would say, that the damn Beel Redington— Put the hands up, Señor, or I am force to shoot!"

Certainly Allison was not short on courage. He simply wasn't a fool. His hands crept to a level with his shoulders. Sanquebel rose thrusting one thirty-eight inside his black silken sash, hurried around to the newcomer, took away his forty-fives and tossed them to the table.

"You didn't finish the job, hombre," quietly said Joey, as the other moved backward one step and lowered his gun. "You see, you overlooked my money. And my watch—"

The watch-chain derringer flashed out to bear full upon the heart of Mario Sanquebel. Allison's grin had faded. His countenance now was rock-hard. Mario dropped the thirty-eight. But the gun had hardly ceased to clatter on the floor when Mario laughed.

"Señor, what a treeck! I am delight weeth you, to teach me that! Ha, ha, ha!" He sobered again, suddenly, and his eyes became round. "I see you som'where biffore; eh? But—no, Señor. Only that you look so much the same like wan beeg hombre that I know in *Estados Unidos* long time ago; wan beeg, fighting hombre, name of Wil'cat Allison, yes. You know heem also, perhaps, biffore he ees dead?"

"Other folks've told me I look like him when I'm mad," said Joey. "I'm his *hijo*, his son, Mario. The Wildcat's Kitten, that's me. If you don't want to hear me squall, do exactly what I say—and right now I'm sayin' that you better not move one single eyelash if you want to keep on livin'."

He snatched the thirty-eight from the Mexican's sash, tossed the weapon under the table and kicked its mate after it. Then he picked up his own Colt, and pocketed the derringer.

"Yeah, Mario," as he possessed himself of the Sam Greet gun also, "I'm one o' the Redington bunch—I just joined 'em—if it'll do you any good to know. I was to slug you the first thing, but I don't like the idea; it ain't my way a-tall. I'll collar you, and hold a hog-leg against your ribs as I take you through the back door there; and if you make a break—"

An odd look was in Sanquebel's eyes now. He interrupted: "I see. Now, I understan'. You are to take me to Redington, and he ees to make me say where I hide the Hartsville bank dinero, eh? But he do not yet know Mario Sanquebel. And no more do you, Señor!"

He lowered his voice: "You weesh that dinero for yourself? *Bien*—I give it to you! But for the Redington peeg, no. I

see you smile, Señor. For why I give you that dinero? Because your *padre*, the Wil'cat Allison, was my good frien'. Wan long time ago he save me when many hombres have me in the trap; you see? You smile yet, Señor. You do not believe me!"

Although earnestness was in every line of Sanquebel's dark face, Joey said promptly: "I never took any stock in fairy tales, Mario. Come on; let's get goin'."

"Wan moment, Señor Allison. I do not go to Redington unless I go to him dead, and he do not weesh that, for then I cannot talk. There ees som'theeng else I weesh to tell you, and thees weel make your eyes pop, but you would not believe me. But when I take you to that bank dinero, and say, 'Here, Señor, all yours,' then you believe what I say. Yes?"

Plainly, he meant it when he told Joey that he would go to Bill Redington dead if he went at all. So Joey accepted the alternative, which amounted to the same thing.

"All right, Mario, take me to that bank loot. And don't you try to get away from me. Bein' a member o' the cat tribe, I can see in the dark. Now don't you forget it."

"Bien!" exclaimed Sanquebel, eyes glowing. "My two gons, weel you breeng them, Señor?"

Allison snatched them off the floor and put them inside his shirt. He grinned a little. For the time being, he was a five-gun man! Mario took a pair of filled cartridge-belts from a nail in the wall and buckled them on with deft fingers. Walking close together, the two men passed through the back doorway and into the velvety night. Sanquebel also had a horse hidden there behind the cantina.

They mounted and rode stirrup to stirrup out of San Carlos and across the Border, then headed for the range of desert hills that lay in between Cottonwood Valley and the "ghost" town that once had been named Badger. After having spent hours in riding here and there among the boulders of that high, bone-dry terrain—with Mario never attempting escape—they came upon a god's garden of boulders that seemed familiar to the Mexican. Here they slipped from their saddles and dropped reins. But Mario did not find his loot. He faced Joe Allison and shrugged in the starlight.

"We must wait until the sun rises, Señor."

Allison was now inclined toward trusting Sanquebel. Plainly, Mario was of both finer and harder clay than either Bill Redington or Bish Morang.

"All right," said Allison, simply.

They sat down and waited. Each dozed a little now and then. Still the dandified *bandito* did not try to get away. At dawn they rose and stretched their limbs. Sanquebel pointed down the long, rocky slope and toward the Santos River.

"The old town; you see?"

"Yeah, and Redington's there," Joey said. "See them six hawsses in that pole corral back o' the biggest house? We better hide our nags and do our huntin' on foot, or we'll have the gang up here after us."

Mario nodded. He would have suggested this, if Allison hadn't. They hid their mounts, and proceeded with the search for the Hartsville bank loot. It dragged out for hours. The sun rose high and poured its furnace heat down upon them. Then Sanquebel, with a smothered exclamation, took from under a rock ledge a canvas bag stuffed with silver, gold, and banknotes. At once he pressed it into Allison's hands.

"Yours!" he cried, his white teeth flash-

They Were Taken By Surprise

ing in a smile. "Now, you believe what I say?"

"Looks like I'd have to," Joey grinned. "Mebbe I'll owe you a big apology before we're through with this, Mario. It's possible Redington asked me to slug you the first thing because he didn't want you to have a chance to talk to me! Now go ahead and tell the rest of it."

Sanquebel spoke rapidly. *"Bueno.* The Wil'cat Allison, your *padre,* he hate Beel Redington, and Redington hate the Wil'cat. Each weesh to be chief of those *banditos!* Beesh Morang and Sam Greet also hate your *padre.* For why? Because Wil'cat Allison, though he ees wan bad hombre, he ees clean; he never rob the woman or the *viejo,* the old. Then thees Redington and Greet and Morang hate *you* also; do you not see? Redington send you to breeng me to heem; eh? What you call catspaw. And after that—he shoot you!"

Some of the color drained from Allison's lean face as he guessed the truth: Bish Morang had seen in him, the Wildcat's son, a future menace, and had sent him to Bill Redington for the sole purpose of having him killed.

He knelt and thrust the canvas bag back under the ledge, piled loose stones over it, straightened with a snap.

"So Greet belongs to that gang too." His voice was bleak and hard. "Anything else to tell me, *amigo?"*

"Si—yes!" Mario was eager, enthusiastic. "Thees will make your eyes pop! Redington ees not the name, Señor. The name—"

Suddenly Allison gripped his arm and drew him into the cover of a hot boulder. Off less than a hundred yards an iron-shod hoof had clattered against stone.

"There goes old Sheriff Dane Howie," hurriedly whispered Allison, "and he's headin' straight for Badger. As sure as hell, Mario, they'll kill him!"

Before the surprised Mexican could make any comment, Joey stepped into plain view and called the officer's name. Howie, iron-gray and lean, reined in and stared, then rode toward the two men. Sanquebel half expected to see his companion draw a weapon. But Joey didn't. The old sheriff stopped his horse within a rod of the pair.

"I almost hoped I wouldn't find you, son. Was glad when I lost your trail back there a mile or so. Say—whose eight hawsses is them corraled there at Badger?"

"You could 'a' guessed that," Allison said. "It's the Santos gang, of course. You was ridin' to your death, Sheriff. I knowed in reason you was after me, but I couldn't let you go on. Did you say eight hawsses? Oughtn't to be but six. Two of 'em has arrived in the last hour."

"I think you'll find Bish Morang with the outfit, and also your lifetime's big mistake—I mean Deputy Sam Greet, Sheriff!"

Old Howie's face went gray. He said: "I want that bunch a heap more than I want you, Joey, and I'm goin' after 'em. I reckon you know there's plenty o' folks sayin' I've never done much as sheriff. Or, mebbe you didn't know it. Anyhow, this is my big chance and I'm takin' it. I'm not acquainted with your Mex friend there, but I'd like to have him, as well as you, as deputies to help me. It'd count a lot for you, Joey. Understand, don't you?"

"I understand, all right," said Allison. "But it's too late. I've made my bed, and I'll lay in it. My *amigo* here, with him it's the same. Better ride to Cottonwood for a posse, and better start before them sidewinders spot you. As you likely know, most of 'em is crack gun-slingers, Sheriff."

After one look that expressed keen disappointment—for Dane Howie liked Joey Allison—Howie turned his horse and rode down the rugged slope toward Badger, keeping to all available cover. His lined countenance mirrored the sheerest desperation. No man knew how he had been cut by insinuations to the effect that he was afraid of these Santos outlaws. And—he

had even chosen probably the worst one of them for a chief deputy!

In the ancient building that once had been a combination dancehall and saloon, Redington and his men sat at dusty tables and drank from bottles that Greet and Morang had brought, and talked with Greet and Morang. After San Carlos *tequila,* this whisky was as nectar. Redington's sentinel had been permitted to quit his post in order that he might partake.

Then Bish looked toward the front doorway and saw standing there Sheriff Dane Howie with leveled six-gun.

"Hands high, everybody!" Howie barked —"I'll kill the man who goes after hardware!"

It was a complete surprise. All save Dallas Slim jerked their hands upward. Dallas, who was directly behind Sam Greet, went for hardware. The gun bellowed, and Howie's rumpled Stetson leaped from his head. Like a plummet the old officer dropped to one knee, firing as he dropped. Greet had side-stepped. Dallas Slim crumpled, and his companions flashed hands toward weapons. In that same split second, a window on either side of the sun-blasted ancient building belched smoke and lead and gun thunder, and there was a ringing yell:

"This is the Wildcat's Kitten, you sidewinders—" he thumbed Colt hammers again, and each of Mario Sanquebel's fast thirty-eights spoke twice—"listen to my squall!"

Old Howie also was burning gunpowder rapidly. The outlaws were bewildered at thus being attacked on three sides, and their aim was worse than bad. Less than a minute of it, and those of them who could were shoving weaponless hands high. The sheriff walked in. Allison and Sanquebel sprang through their windows. Hurriedly Joey gathered up the outlaw guns.

Bish Morang and Sam Greet were dead, Redington and Dallas Slim dangerously wounded, Fonso Peters had a broken shoulder, Jud Okell's left arm was shattered.

"Joey, you surprised me about as much as you surprised this gang," Howie said, "and it sure was lucky for me that you bobbed up like you did. After all, you couldn't have the old man shot down, could you? It's not in you to be any outlaw, son. From this minute on, you're my chief deputy—a little money will square up all there is against you—and it won't be long until you're sheriff in my place. Now let's tie this bunch o' livin' and dead on their hawsses, and head for Cottonwood City with 'em."

Just as the cavalcade reached the outskirts of the county seat, hours later, Mario Sanquebel dropped back to Joey Allison. That young man was decidedly blue now. He'd done something he had always looked upon as utterly unpardonable. He'd had to shoot a man in the back.

"I ride now for Mexico," Sanquebel muttered. "My frien', take the sheriff up queeck; be the chief deputy, as he say. Do not be the damn fool as I am, and your good *padre* was! Please."

"Sure," said Joey. "Listen, Mario. From now on, you stay in your own country. Savvy? Fine. That—er, that Hartsville bank loot. We left it, and I don't want it. You understand, I'm not sworn in as the chief deputy yet! This gang has stuck that same bank up half a dozen times, and it owes you the money as a reward, we'll say. Right?"

"'Sta bien." Mario's white teeth gleamed in a smile. "Biffore I go back, there ees wan, two theeng I did not tell you, Señor Wil'cat's Kitten. Redington—the name ees not Redington, but Greet, a brother to Sam Greet, the dead peeg. You see? And eet was Sam Greet who shoot your *padre* een the back wan long time ago!"

Allison's countenance brightened instantly. "Then I ain't sorry I got Sam in the same place. *Adios,* Mario, and good luck!"

Slim Akers and the Tonto Kid Meet as Strangers—but on the Surface Only

Slim Plays a Fast Game

By HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

Author of "Wildcat Reward," "A Slim Chance," etc.

THE general manager of the stage line had been having trouble in operating the Oro division. Gold had been discovered in the hills back of Beardstown. The stage, carrying shipments of bullion from Beardstown to Oro had been held up three times in the past several months. Two shotgun messengers had been killed. Following the third hold-up the division manager resigned. General Manager Wentworth found it imperative to select a division manager with a reputation. His choice fell upon a Mr. Slim Akers, a young man with a clear brown eye, an affable manner and unquestioned nerve. At the time Mr. Akers was living quietly in a local hotel, apparently possessed of some means, for he did no work. He was known, however, as a shrewd hand at poker.

Among the other candidates for the division job was a burly, hot tempered man, forty odd years of age, who had in turn been mine boss, deputy sheriff, and railroad detective. His name was Dan Slattery. Of him it was said that he always got what he went after. He was not too modest to admit it. His methods were rough-shod. In applying for the division job he said, "I'll run your line for you, and clean up on the stick-'em-up men, if I have to ride shotgun myself."

Manager Wentworth was impressed. But he adhered to his original choice. Mr. Akers was quiet, as capable as Slattery, and of steadier habits. Slattery's known weaknesses were cards and liquor. Mr. Akers drank seldom, and cards were not his weakness. They were his profession. In financial difficulties at the time, Slattery determined to get the job. Aware that his one competitor had once been the close companion of the notorious Tonto Kid, a young outlaw now supposed to be hiding out in Mexico, Slattery had another interview with Manager Wentworth. Mr. Akers' name was mentioned. "Akers is a good man," said Slattery. "He's cool, nervy, and knows every crook in the country."

"That ought to be to his advantage."

Slattery nodded. "Knows 'em all. Travelin' with the Tonto Kid for four or five years, he ought to."

"The Tonto Kid!"

"Helped the Kid out of more tight corners, and backed up his game more than any other friend the Kid has. And the Kid's got some friends."

Mr. Wentworth pondered. That Akers and the Tonto Kid had been partners was unwelcome news. More than one stage hold-up had been credited to the Kid. In fact it was rumored that he was responsible for the latest hold-up of the Oro stage. "Drop in about nine, tomorrow morning," said Wentworth. Slattery said he would be there, on both feet.

MANAGER WENTWORTH took occasion to interview Mr. Akers. Mr. Akers not only admitted Slattery's charge, but added that his friendship with the Tonto Kid would continue, job or no job. "In that case," said Wentworth, "I'll have to consider someone else."

"That's all right, Mr. Wentworth. I'm satisfied. You figure that if, I say *if*, the Tonto Kid took a notion to stick up the Oro stage, as division manager I would not be any too anxious to apprehend him. On the other hand, if I were division manager, the last thing the Kid would do would be to get me in trouble. Possibly you hadn't thought of that."

"That's one way of looking at it. I haven't made my choice yet. There's another man after the job. I'll let you know tomorrow, about nine-thirty."

Mr. Akers bowed. "You have let me know already. Don't imagine that my feelings are hurt. As it happens, I have just received an offer to manage another business. Thanks for laying your cards on the table. I hope Slattery proves satisfactory."

Manager Wentworth wondered how Mr. Akers knew that the other candidate was Dan Slattery. Mr. Akers could have told him that the ex-railroad detective was the only man in town who knew that he and the Tonto Kid were friends.

The Natchez was running full blast. Beardstown was a good camp and the Natchez was a good saloon. Like Gaul under the Romans, it was divided into three parts; the bar and dining hall adjoining, the elegantly equipped gambling parlors on the second floor, and the living quarters of Mr. Slim Akers, for three years proprietor and active manager of the tables. Mr. Akers enjoyed a patronage even beyond his dreams. His habiliments reflected the elegance of his type; immaculate prince albert and trousers, equally immaculate linen, a narrow black tie, and shoes like their wearer, never lacking polish. Contrary to the usual custom of card men, Mr. Akers wore no visible jewels, nor was his white silk shirt ever soiled by a shoulder holster, his waistband burdened with a six-shooter. His life insurance consisted simply of a neat little silver plated derringer concealed by the cuff of his left sleeve, and attached to his wrist by a broad leather band. So well ordered was his establishment, so shrewdly affable his personality that since his arrival in Beardstown he had never had occasion to resort to his left sleeve.

OUT of a noisy bar about midnight of a Saturday, ascended Slattery, new Division Manager of the stage line. He had been playing heavily of late, and had lost considerable at the tables. A division manager of a stage line may enjoy a little game of poker without causing comment. But Slattery was plunging. In six weeks he had lost all his personal cash and had begun to draw upon the company's fund at the bank. Sam Atchison, manager of the bank, could hardly refuse to honor Slattery's checks, but he knew where the money was going, and began to worry. Mr. Akers, who suspected Slattery of dipping into the company funds, never worried about anything. But he did not want the stage company, a power in the land, to interfere with his business. They could. So, upon the appearance that evening of the division manager, Mr. Akers caused considerable surprise and some protest by abruptly declaring his establishment closed until Monday.

Slattery looked Mr. Akers over from head to foot. "Closing at midnight, eh? Getting ready to go to church? Or is the bank broke?"

Slim Akers smiled pleasantly. "To which bank do you refer?"

Just drunk enough to be careless, yet not too drunk to miss the implication, Slattery thrust his flushed face close to the gambler's. "Damn you, Akers!"

Patrons, cashing their chips, or wishing they had chips to cash, paused. Mr. Akers' helpers, covering the tables, also paused. Would the boss swallow that, or make Slattery swallow it? Apparently adjusting his left cuff, Mr. Akers kept his eyes on Slattery's hands. "Possibly. But as an alternative, suppose you attend to your division and allow me to attend to mine. This place is closed, till Monday."

"A hell of a dump!" Slattery turned and pounded downstairs.

Slim Akers' right hand man, a weazened card man named Rimmy, sauntered up. "He kind of took it as if it was a personal insult."

"Just between ourselves," said Slim, "it was."

Rimmy's graying eyebrows went up. "He's been a pretty good customer."

"Too good. That's the trouble."

"You mean his trouble?"

Slim shook his head. "No, mine."

RIMMY, who had no other name worth mentioning, knew what he would have done had Slattery gone for his gun. No one was going to put a slug into the boss if he knew it. On his way to his room, Slim Akers paused. "Rimmy, you had better get a good sleep tomorrow. Monday will be a hard day."

A warmth like that in the eyes of a spaniel praised by its master, glowed in the hard eyes of Slim's assistant. What other boss had ever given a damn whether he got a good sleep or not? Dropping in for a nightcap, Rimmy noted that Slattery was still drinking at the Natchez bar. Slim's assistant drank alone. Wishing the head bartender good night he was turning to leave when Slattery's voice rose above the tumult. "If he ran a straight game, it would be different. The whole bunch of 'em are crooks."

This, to Rimmy, was both insult and challenge. Never before had his boss's game been questioned. A low voice bade Slattery cool off, warned him that one of Slim's men was in the room. Rimmy's first impulse was to step up to Slattery and call his hand. But most probably that would mean a killing. And a killing in the Natchez would involve the gambling house. Suppressing the impulse, Rimmy turned and began to walk toward the doorway. Above the din he again heard Slattery's voice. "Mebby. But he hasn't got the nerve."

This was the insult supreme. But the gambler ignored it. Sooner or later Slattery would be coming from the saloon on his way to his hotel. Before he got there he either would apologize or repeat the insult. Rimmy didn't care which. The quarrel would be well outside the Natchez, and would be considered a personal matter between himself and Slattery. That would leave Slim in the clear.

Slattery lived in a small hotel between the Natchez and the Beardstown bank. Rimmy took his stand across the street in the deep, shadowy entrance to the hardware store. Weazened and stoop shouldered, he stood peering out into the darkness when a horseman clattered past and dismounted in the fan of light from the Natchez doorway. He looked like some slender youth from the cattle country. But Rimmy knew that figure almost as well as he knew Slim's. The Tonto Kid, supposed to be in Mexico, was in town. Rimmy was surprised. He wondered if Slim had sent for the Kid, or if he had just happened along.

SHORTLY after the Tonto Kid entered the saloon, Slattery came out with Rourke, one of the assistant bartenders. Rimmy had never liked Rourke, and had

less reason to like him now. Rourke would be in the way. He would be a witness in case anything happened. Slim's assistant decided to wait until Slattery and Rourke parted company, and then talk with Slattery. Stopping at the hotel entrance they stood talking for several minutes. Finally Slattery went into the hotel. Rimmy shrugged. Rourke had spoiled his game. But no. In a few minutes Slattery came out again. After glancing around, the two walked up the street toward the bank. It was nearly one o'clock. There was no one

in sight. Rourke took his stand in front of the bank doorway. Slattery disappeared around the corner. For half an hour Rimmy watched. Something queer was on foot. Finally Rimmy heard a low whistle. Immediately Rourke left his place in front of the bank and hastened around the corner.

Crossing the street like a shadow, Rimmy all but bumped into them as they came around the corner. Slattery was carrying a large valise. Rourke went for his gun and fired, and Rimmy dropped in the street.

He lay there until daylight. A miner from the hills found him and carried him to the Natchez. Summoned from his room, Slim Akers found that his assistant had been shot through the chest. The wounded man, still unconscious, was taken upstairs and Slim routed out a doctor.

Bending over his assistant, Slim asked the doctor if there was anything he could do to bring Rimmy to.

"Yes. But it would only be temporary."

"Try it. I'll be responsible."

Several minutes passed before the wounded man reacted to the hypodermic Eyes staring straight ahead he did not seem to see Slim bending over him. "Who got you?" Slim spoke sharply, trying to rouse his assistant. But the blue lips, faltering, were unable to shape themselves to answer. Slim turned to the doctor. The doctor shook his head. "He won't last out the day."

Mr. Akers' affability vanished. "That boy is never done till he's dead. If a thousand, gold, will be any inducement, get busy."

The doctor rolled up his sleeves and opened his instrument case.

It was Sunday. The Saturday night shift of bartenders was off duty. Yet Slattery's comments of the previous evening were common property. Rimmy had been in the bar when Slattery declared the game upstairs crooked. Rourke and Slattery had left together. A stranger had ridden into town about the time Rimmy left the saloon. No one seemed to know who he was. Mr. Akers sifted the facts, discarding all comments and surmises. Knowing Rimmy, it was not difficult for Mr. Akers to conclude that his assistant might have had an argument with Slattery. That Slattery had got the best of the weazened little gambler was a surprise. Examination of Rimmy's gun proved that he had not fired a shot. That there was something more to it than a personal quarrel was Mr. Akers' final conclusion. Quietly he set himself to watch developments. Sooner or later the inevitable mistake would be made. Someone would show his hand.

ABOUT nine Sunday morning busines began to pick up in the Natchez. A shooting always stimulated trade. Beardstown miners who had survived the previous evening commented loudly on the crime. By degrees Slattery's name was injected into the conversation. Cash Malone, proprietor of the saloon, was more than discreet in answering questions. His assistants were dumb. Coming downstairs

the doctor was accosted by a group of miners who wanted to know how Rimmy was making it. Boisterous and big hearted they offered to make up a purse to defray any expenses connected with his recovery. But Mr. Akers, they learned, had already attended to that. Not to be deterred from their purpose they made up a purse, handing the money to Cash Malone. For Rimmy's burial expenses, they said. He might not recover. They liked Rimmy.

In the midst of the excitement appeared Slim Akers, immaculate as usual, quiet, apparently unconcerned. Bombarded with questions, he did not even suggest a solution of the shooting. If, however, anyone had a suggestion, he would be glad to hear it. A big, bewhiskered miner drew Slim aside and gestured toward a slender young fellow standing near the end of the bar. This stranger, the miner informed Slim, had ridden into town about midnight, bought a drink at the Natchez bar, and almost immediately gone out again, shortly after Rimmy had left the saloon. The miners seemed eager to fasten the crime onto someone—preferably a stranger. Slim smiled to himself. The slender young fellow, unknown in Beardstown, was Slim's friend, the Tonto Kid. They had found it advisable to temporarily dissolve partnership, Slim establishing himself in Beardstown, the Tonto Kid drifting down into Mexico. Neither being aware of the present status of the other, they now wisely refrained from recognition. A drunken miner breasted up to the Tonto Kid. "I seen you in here last night, young fella. What I want to know is, what you doin' here now?"

The Tonto Kid, gazing at the opposite wall, didn't bother to turn his head. "Listenin' to a fool."

The big miner swung his arm. Lithely the Tonto Kid ducked, stepped back and quietly told the group in the saloon to take care of their spokesman before he got hurt.

Something in the cool, almost insulting poise of the young stranger awakened a primitive blood lust in the hitherto peaceful assembly. Unreasoning, quick to do a kindness or avenge a wrong, hot for a victim to satisfy their sense of justice, the miners turned on the Tonto Kid. They did not know who he was, they did not care. Suspicion had been cast upon him. Rimmy, a square little man whom they liked, lay upstairs mortally wounded.

Slim Akers was about to vouch for the stranger, when he was interrupted by the arrival of Slattery. Barging through the doorway in his get-out-of-my-way manner, the stage-line manager stopped abruptly. He was sober, and when sober a man of quick wit and ingenuity. In a flash Slattery took in the situation. Here was a man he could use. Slattery held up his hand. "Hold on, boys. I know this fella. He's all right."

"How do you know he's all right? He was in here last night, and went out just after Rimmy left. He——"

SLATTERY laughed. "That doesn't prove anything. If you think this boy had anything to do with the shooting, you're 'way off. I sent for him to come to Beardstown and take a job."

Slim Akers was not more surprised at this statement than the Tonto Kid himself. Both wondered what Slattery was up to. And both, as was cusomary with them in such cases, kept silent. Grumbling, the miners drew back. Slattery stepped up to the Tonto Kid. "Would you mind coming over to the stage line office? It's pretty noisy in here." Slattery waved his arm. "Let's have a drink, first. Everybody up. This is on me."

With one exception, his invitation was accepted. Mr. Akers was not drinking that morning. Mr. Akers was watching the Tonto Kid. Presently a glance passed between them. "How about it?" The Kid's eyes asked. Unseen by the group at the bar was Mr. Akers' brief nod. "Go ahead."

Slattery and the stranger had gone. Sauntering out into the sunlight, Slim Akers was both satisfied and puzzled.

Slattery had saved him from publicly declaring the Kid his friend. Because of the recent shooting, the gambler was especially anxious that he and the Tonto Kid remain as strangers to one another. Like Slattery, he had use for him. And now, by a lucky twist, the Tonto Kid was in Slattery's camp. Had Mr. Akers had the ordering of it all, it could not have turned out better. Slattery's sudden decision to help the Tonto Kid out of a difficulty, seemed queer, to say the least. It began to look to Slim as if the shooting of Rimmy was merely an incident in Slattery's game. What the game was, Slim did not even surmise. But he would find out. Sooner or later he and the Tonto Kid would meet and have a talk.

Bowlegging up the street, a puncher asked Slim what his idea was in closing up Sunday. "Here I rode forty miles to just take a whirl at your game. Now I got to spend my fortune gettin' drunk."

"The idea," said Slim, "is that Rimmy's upstairs, shot up pretty bad."

"The hell you say? Who done that?"

"He hasn't said—yet."

"Who, Rimmy?"

"No. The man who did it."

The puncher scratched his head. "Was you expectin' him to?"

"Yes. I'm expecting him to. Have a good time, Bud."

ABOUT eleven o'clock that evening someone tapped at the locked door of the gambling hall. Slim answered the knock. He was not surprised to see the Tonto Kid standing in the hallway. Though they had not met for several years they merely nodded. Slim led the Tonto Kid past the shrouded tables to his rooms. He turned up the lamp. White and shrunken, Rimmy lay breathing heavily. The Kid's eyes asked a question.

"Don't know," said Slim. "But I've made my guess."

Straddling a chair the Kid faced his old friend. "Heard you were in Beardstown. Havin' nothin' to do, I thought I'd look you up."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, I've been around some. Things have been quiet. How about Rimmy?"

Slim shook his head. "I'm hoping he'll make it. Doctor was in again about six. Says Rimmy has one chance in a thousand."

"Has he talked any?"

"Not a word."

The Tonto Kid's slim brown fingers moved. His dark eyes expressionless, he sat staring at the wounded man. "Your stage line manager done wished a job onto me. Seems he's short a shotgun messenger."

Opening a long dresser drawer, Mr. Akers drew out a heavy, sawed-off shotgun and a belt of ten gauge shells. "Buckshot, hand loaded."

The Tonto Kid nodded. "Slattery has already furnished the gun."

"What gauge?"

"Ten."

"All right, use it. But don't use any shells he gives you."

"Good. Any more orders?"

Slim lighted a cigar. "I happen to know that Slattery *isn't* short a shotgun messenger. He rung you in on this deal for a special purpose. What that is, I don't know. Do you?"

"That's what I came to see you about. He told me there was a big shipment of bullion goin' out from the mines tomorrow mornin'. A fella by the name of Bill Crosby is handlin' the ribbons—old time stage driver, so Slattery says. We'll have a couple of passengers. Funny, that Slattery was so particular to tell me all about 'em. Told me their names and where they was headed for. Wonder he didn't give me their pictures."

Slim's dark eyebrows went up. "So Bill Crosby is driving? That's queer. Bill has been riding shotgun for that stage for three years. The regular driver's Dad Enderby. He's in town and in good health, so far as I know."

"I thought you'd enjoy the layout," said the Tonto Kid. "I did. Funny, now, that a man like Slattery should think he could run a whizzer on me."

"On me, you mean. Who are the passengers?"

"One of 'em named Thompson. Owns the hardware store here. The other is a bartender. Seems he quit the Natchez and is goin' down to Oro to take another job. His name is Rourke."

SLIM was pondering this information when a movement on the bed attracted his attention. He rose and bent over Rimmy. The wounded man's lips moved. Slim nodded. "All right, Rimmy." The gambler gave the wounded man a sip of water, then returned to his chair. "Go ahead, Pete."

"Did Rimmy know me?"

"Can't say. What time do you pull out tomorrow morning?"

"Six."

Mr. Akers became absorbed in thought. The stage would reach Highbank Cut, half way between Beardstown and Oro about noon. Riding across country a man on horseback could make it to Highbank in three hours. Not that there was any good reason for anyone to ride to Highbank—a wild, lonely spot on the Oro road. Slim asked his companion if Slattery had mentioned any special stops along the way. Slattery had not, although he told the new messenger the stage had been held up twice at the entrance to Highbank Cut.

"I don't need to teach you arithmetic," declared Slim. "But when you get to Highbank, keep your eye on Rourke. He's the man that shot Rimmy, last night. Slattery was with him when it happened."

"So that's what Rimmy was tryin' to tell you? Say, why don't you jump Rourke right now? He's in town."

"I could. And I would, if I wasn't after the man that's behind Rourke. I want Rourke to show his hand."

"He wants to be mighty careful what's in it, if he shows it to me," said the Tonto Kid, gazing at the man on the bed. "Old Rimmy's been a good friend to both of us."

A KNOCK sounded on the door of the gambling hall. Slim rose and made his way down the long room. Cash Malone, proprietor of the saloon, was at the lookout hole. "Just wanted to let you know that the Beardstown bank was robbed last night—cleaned out. Whoever did it covered up so well that Sam Atchison didn't find it out until a few minutes ago. Sam wouldn't have found out till Monday at that, if he hadn't left some stock-market reports in his safe. He wanted to look 'em over before Monday morning. Somebody must have had the combination of the safe. Left it shut, and nothing to show it had been tampered with."

Mr. Akers did not seem to be greatly surprised. "That will cripple you some, won't it?"

"Hit me for over two thousand. How about you?"

"Hit me harder than that. Won't you come in?"

"Can't. I'm going over and have a talk with Sam."

Slim himself had lost something over fifteen thousand. He still had enough money in his own private safe to carry on his business, but the surplus, his savings of three years, was a different matter. It was the velvet with which he hoped to upholster his old age. Rimmy had been shot. The Beardstown bank robbed. Rourke was quitting a good job without any apparent reason, so far as the general public knew. But there was a reason, perhaps two. Rimmy had been found near the bank. Slattery had replaced his regular driver with a shotgun messenger and replaced the messenger with a stranger. If things began to pile up much faster, something would slip, and down would come the cob house. Mr. Akers turned to Cash Malone. "If Sam is actually cleaned out, and you need some cash, Monday, I can help you out."

"Thanks, Slim. Got any idea who turned the trick?"

"Several ideas. You might tell Sam, for me, to say nothing about the robbery till Monday evening. I'm building a little corral myself. I don't want the horses stampeded till I get it finished."

"Rourke and Slattery have been mighty thick, lately."

Mr. Akers agreed. "Let Rourke run. He'll put his foot in a gopher hole. When he turns over he'll show the color of his belly."

"How's Rimmy making it?"

"He's pretty low. But if you want to lose a little more money, I've got a thou-

sand that says he'll outlast the man that shot him."

"I'll keep my thousand," declared Malone. "If you're handling this thing personally, I'll side you."

"Thanks, Cash. Tell Sam to hold his horses till Monday evening. Then if he doesn't like the way things stack up he can turn 'em loose."

Returning to the bedroom Slim told the Tonto Kid to make himself comfortable. "I'm going for a little pasear," said Slim. "I'll be back before midnight."

ROUSED from sleep the superintendent of the Beardstown mines was surprised to find Mr. Akers at his door. Mr. Akers apologized for disturbing him. "I'm here to make a trade with you, Bartley."

"What kind of a trade?"

"Information. I've got something that may interest you."

"If it's a personal matter," the superintendent hesitated, "I'd be willing. But if it is anything about company business——"

"The Beardstown Bank was cleaned out last night. It's near the end of the month, and you've got a payroll coming."

"Cleaned out? Great Scott! What—say, wait a minute till I get some clothes on. Is Sam Atchison in town?"

"Hold on a minute. Advertising the robbery just now won't do any good. Talk to Sam, but keep the news to yourself. The information I need I shall also keep to myself."

"What information?"

"Are you shipping any bullion by stage tomorrow?"

"Bullion? No. We won't ship any for another month."

"Thanks. Glad you won't." With this somewhat puzzling remark, Slim Akers swung away into the darkness.

Shortly before midnight he returned to his rooms. The Tonto Kid, asleep in a chair, was on his feet before the key had turned in the lock. Slim Akers opened a bureau drawer, drew out a neatly folded pair of overalls, a black cotton shirt, a worn belt and holster, and a pair of riding boots. Wrapping these compactly he tied the bundle and addressed it to himself, Beardstown. "Pete, you might drop this off at Peterson's ranch, tomorrow morning. His mail box is the first one south of town."

In a lean-to back of the stage line stables, Rourke the bartender stood talking with Slattery. It was close to midnight. Rourke seemed nervous. "I got to thinking it over, Dan, and I tell you I don't like it. Suppose that new shotgun messenger was to suspicion something, and go for his gun?"

Slattery laid his hand on Rourke's arm. "Don't worry about that. Didn't I tell you I drew all the loads from the shells and replaced them with powder and wads —no shot? When you get to Highbank, you've got to get out, for a necessary reason. You tell Bill to stop. I've given the new shotgun messenger orders not to

stop going through Highbank Cut. Riding gun for the stage, he'll be feeling mighty important. Chances are he'll tell Bill to keep going. I've had a talk with Bill. He won't take orders from the new messenger. Don't think for a minute the new man hasn't got nerve. He has. Likely he'll shove his gun into Bill's ribs and tell him to drive on. Naturally, you think the messenger is going to hold up the stage himself. That's your chance."

"Is Bill in on this?"

"Bill will get his split, the same as you."

Rourke shook his head. "I dunno, Dan. Suppose things don't break right?"

"You'd better see that they do. It's your big chance. Figure it out. This new man was in town last night, about the time Rimmy got shot. He's a stranger here, and the boys already suspect that he had a hand in the shooting. If he follows up by holding up the stage, that will be evidence enough to satisfy anybody. But you want to make a job of it. He mustn't get a chance to talk. With him out of the way, you won't have to worry about last night."

Rourke nodded. "Who is he, anyhow?"

"Some young waddie who used to punch cows down on the Tonto. He's keeping his name to himself."

"All right, Dan. I'll put it through."

Slattery smiled to himself. "You ought to. You'll have a valise with you. And you know what's in it."

Rourke knew. Something over forty-five thousand in cash. It would be in his possession until things had quieted down, when Slattery would come to Oro and divide the plunder. Forty-five thousand! But why wait till then. Rourke could see himself in Mexico, living easy.

"All right, Dan, I'll put it through."

Something in Rourke's change of tone awakened Slattery's suspicion. "Be mighty careful what you do after you get to Oro. If your foot slips you're in for a hard fall."

STANDING in front of the Natchez when the Oro stage pulled out at six, next morning, Mr. Akers noted that Bill Crosby was driving, and that beside him on the high seat sat the Tonto Kid, a shotgun across his knees. Rourke and the local hardware merchant were the only passengers. Crosby swung his whip. The four broncos spread out and dug into their collars. Leaving the stage line office, Slattery crossed the street to the Natchez. "Hello, Akers. How's Rimmy making it?"

Slim ignored the question. "I see you've got a new messenger?"

"Yes. That kid that was in the saloon, yesterday. He's got nerve. He ought to make a good man. How's Rimmy?"

"Oh, Rimmy? Why he's pretty low. But he's alive yet."

"That so? I heard he had cashed in."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Slattery."

"Are you looking for trouble?"

Slim Akers' dark eyebrows moved slightly. "Not this morning. However, I may change my mind before noon."

Glaring at the slender, elegantly clothed gambler, Slattery turned and strode into the Natchez. Mr. Akers consulted his watch. It was five minutes past six. The stage would reach Peterson's ranch about six-thirty. About nine-thirty Mr. Akers would pick up the bundle the Tonto Kid had left there. At twelve, barring interruptions, the stage would reach Highbank. Barring interruptions, Mr. Akers would reach Highbank at the same hour. Meanwhile he would step upstairs and see how Rimmy was getting along.

AT NINE that morning Mr. Akers led two saddled horses through the rear doorway of the Beardstown livery. Taking the lead rope, he rode toward the foothills. At nine-thirty he dismounted at the Peterson mail box, picked up a bundle addressed to himself, and opened it. For miles north and south the road was empty of travel. Peterson's ranch house lay several miles back in the foothills. Mr. Akers

sat down, removed his clothing and made a quick change. Save for a slight pallor from living indoors, he was now a tall, slim puncher, in jeans, black cotton shirt, boots, and gray Stetson. Near the mail box lay a bundle still addressed to himself at Beardstown. Leaving the highway he rode bee line for the distant notch called locally, Highbank Cut. He rode swiftly, yet with judgment.

Rourke and the hardware merchant were startled by the sound of a shot as the stage rattled along the Oro highway. Rourke leaned out. A rabbit scampered from a clump of greasewood. The new messenger's gun came up and boomed. The rabbit kept on running. "Horses don't like it," said the driver.

The new messenger reached for another shell. "Then they better get used to it, till I get the hang of this gun. The dam' thing must have a bend in the barrel." It was no bend in the barrel, however, that caused the Tonto Kid to miss. Deliberately he was trying out the shells Slattery had given him. They were all blanks.

After firing a dozen shots, and missing each time, the new messenger reloaded with the shells Slim had supplied him with. Rourke nudged the hardware merchant. "He's a hell of a shot, for a messenger." The bartender pulled a long-barreled six-shooter from his waistband. "Now if anybody was to hold us up——" He leered significantly as he shoved the gun back again. The hardware merchant shrugged. He didn't like Rourke, nor Rourke's idea.

THE horses slowed down as the stage approached the grade leading into the cut. Rourke rapped on the window. "Hey, Bill. Pull up a minute."

The Tonto Kid glanced around. "What do you want to stop for?"

Rourke told him. The Tonto Kid turned to the driver. "You better keep goin'. He can wait till we get through the Cut."

"I'm handling this team," said Crosby.

So the driver was in the deal, too? The Tonto Kid grinned. "And I'm handlin' this gun."

Rourke had jumped out and was coming forward.

"Get back where you belong," said the Tonto Kid.

Rourke fired point blank. The shot creased the Tonto Kid's shoulder. The shotgun boomed. Crosby, who could have easily jolted the new messenger's arm, hadn't made a move. The shotgun shells, so Slattery had told him, were blank. Rourke dropped with a charge of buckshot in his thigh.

The Tonto Kid leaped down, leveled the shotgun at the driver. "You're next."

"That," said a quiet voice, "will hardly be necessary." Sitting his horse easily, yet plainly ready for business, a handkerchief tied below his eyes, a man garbed like a cowpuncher pointedly indicated Crosby, the driver. Crosby was an old hand. He didn't lack nerve. But he had sense enough to know that Slattery's ace had been trumped. Hands in the air, he kept his eye on the hold-up man. Something about his voice and manner seemed strangely familiar.

Dismounting, the highwayman politely ordered the hardware merchant to step out of the stage. Thompson came out, his hands also in the air. The hold-up man told him politely to put his hands in his pockets if he wished to. The hardware merchant recalled Rourke's talk about the possibility of a hold-up. It seemed a startling coincidence. He asked if he might give Rourke, who lay groaning, a drink of water. The highwayman nodded. Securing the black valise that Rourke had left in the stage, the hold-up man told Thompson to lift Rourke in. "Get in yourself, Mr. Thompson," he gestured. "Get going, Bill."

BILL CROSBY got going. Meanwhile the hardware merchant bound up, as best he could, Rourke's shattered thigh,

When the stage reached the level below the Cut, Thompson leaned from the window. "Who was it, Bill?" Thompson thought he knew, but he wanted Bill Crosby's opinion.

"Sounded to me mighty like Slim Akers."

Thompson, who had the same idea, pretended surprise. "Akers? He didn't look like Akers to me. Who is the other man?"

"Don't know who he is," the driver popped his whip, "but I know what he is. He's the wrong man to monkey with."

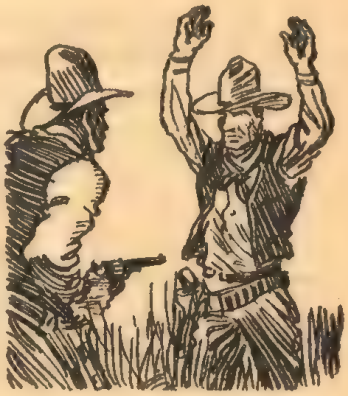
Delayed by a rancher who met the stage, news of the hold-up reached Beardstown shortly after Mr. Slim Akers and the Tonto Kid arrived back in town. In the livery two sweating horses were getting a rub down, paid for in advance. But one stop had been made during that hard ride, when Mr. Akers picked up a bundle at Peterson's mail box. As Slattery came out onto the street after hearing of the hold-up, he saw Mr. Akers, cool, immaculately dressed, standing in front of the Natchez talking with a young puncher in jeans and rowdy. The puncher carried a sawed-off shotgun.

Identifying the puncher as his recent messenger, Slattery did some fast thinking. According to report, Rourke had been badly wounded. A black satchel was missing from the stage. Nothing had happened to Bill Crosby who, the rancher said, had driven on toward Oro. Not the hold-up man, but the messenger, had put a load of buckshot into Rourke. Rourke and the messenger had had a difference of opinion. Rourke had made a mistake. That was Bill Crosby's story, as told to the rancher. Striding toward the printer's to get out a handbill advertising a reward for the highwayman, Slattery came to an abrupt conclusion. Mr. Slim Akers was at the bottom of this unexpected turn of events. To obliterate Mr. Akers would remove the major menace. But there would still be left the messenger. A man who could transform blank loads into buckshot at instant need would not be easy to reckon with. Slattery's conclusion was immediately substantiated. Hearing his name called, he turned to see Mr. Akers, still in front of the Natchez. But the messenger had vanished. It was Mr. Akers who now carried the sawed off shot-gun. It was Mr. Akers who gestured gracefully to Slattery to cross the street. Slattery accepted the invitation. "What do you want, Akers?"

SLIM broke the gun, drew out the shells and thrust them into his pocket. He handed the gun to Slattery. "A friend of mine asked me to return this to you."

"Friend of yours, eh?"

"Friend of mine. Old friend of mine. I hate to question his nerve, but he told me that riding shot-gun messenger was too risky. So he resigned. But what isn't risky? My business for instance." Slim gestured toward the Natchez. "Any minute some misguided enthusiast might take a notion to bump me off. See what happened to Rimmy. Even the banking business isn't safe—in Beardstown. See what happened to Sam Atchison. Short forty-five thousand, and the mine payroll coming. And your business—two shot-gun messengers on the seat, two passengers peacefully riding inside, and all of a sudden one of them gets filled with buckshot. Why, drilling, and shooting giant powder in the mines is child's play compared to ordinary commercial pursuits, like ours."



Although the suave, impassive face of the gambler told Slattery nothing, the

temptation to have it out, then and there, showed in Slattery's eyes. Mr. Akers smiled. It was a cold smile, and not encouraging. "That's why," he said, as if Slattery had declared himself, "I gave you the shot-gun. It will serve to keep your hands out of mischief." For a second they stood eyeing each other. Each knew that it was war to the finish.

Slattery, a knock-down-and-drag-out fighter, was largely governed by impulse. Mr. Akers did not ignore impulses, but he always allowed them to cool before he handled them. After Slattery had gone, boiling inside, but outwardly collected, Mr. Akers called on a young attorney in town. Immediately following the visit, the attorney engaged a horse and buggy and drove to Oro. Slim had begun to dig his trenches for the final encounter.

THE gambling hall remained closed Monday. But word went round that it would be open for business Tuesday evening. Slattery had not been idle. Summoned by wire, the sheriff of Oro County arrived in Beardstown late Tuesday afternoon. Although not summoned by wire, strangely enough the general manager of the stage line arrived the same afternoon. Rumor spread that the sheriff wanted to interview Slattery's recent shot-gun messenger who had not been seen since Monday. The messenger's horse was still in the livery, and the messenger was supposed to be somewhere in town. He was. At the special invitation of Slim Akers, the Tonto Kid was occupying the gambler's rooms, looking after his old friend Rimmy, who, despite the doctor's verdict, was still alive, though scarcely able to speak or lift a finger.

The tables were going in the Natchez Gambling Hall. It was a warm night. The windows were open. Mr. Akers personally saw to it that the two rear windows, opening on the alley back of the building, were not only open, but securely so. That some six feet below them ran the slanting roof of a shed attached to the saloon, did not seem to bother him in the least. In fact he considered it a happy circumstance. There was but one entrance to the room, the stairway leading up from the saloon below. Sometimes it was advisable to have a handy exit.

Being too early for any great activity there were few present. A group of miners hung round the roulette wheel, a game of stud was going, four townsmen at the table. Faro was doing nothing. Mr. Akers himself was conversing with the hardware merchant, Thompson. They seemed to have arrived at some sort of understanding when Slattery, accompanied by the general manager, banker Atchison and the sheriff, entered. They moved over to where Slim stood at the faro table. With his customary courtesy he welcomed them, hoping they would spend a pleasant evening.

"That depends," said the sheriff. "Personally I'm looking for the young fella Mr. Slattery hired to ride gun for him."

"And I figure you know where he is," said Slattery.

General Manager Wentworth, a stout, bald man with a keen blue eye, surveyed the handsomely furnished establishment. "Looks as if you do a pretty good business, Mr. Akers."

"Fair." He gestured to the tables. "This is my vocation, by necessity. I would much prefer managing a stage line."

The sheriff laughed. "Interested in stage lines, eh?"

"Deeply interested."

Slattery and the sheriff exchanged glances. "Well, Mr. Akers," the sheriff paused and looked round the room, "I'm afraid I've got to close you up."

"You needn't be afraid. But I'd appreciate your reason."

"You are suspected of having held up the Oro stage yesterday."

ROUND about the room, play ceased. Two or three left the tables and moved toward the group near Slim. On the opposite side of the faro lay out, he

faced his visitors. In the corner of the room a player upset a stack of chips and grunted as he stooped to pick them up. "The Oro stage?" Slim spoke as though trying to recall the incident. "Why, yes. I held it up, at Highbank, Monday noon."

Slattery had told the sheriff he suspected Akers of having engineered the recent hold up. But the gambler's admission that he had personally stopped the stage, came as a sort of shock, not alone to Slattery himself, but to the banker, the general manager of the stage line and the sheriff. They stared at Slim as if waiting for a stronger confirmation of his own statement. Puzzled that he placed himself as a criminal, they did not know what to say, nor what to expect. The fact that the gambler had confessed, worried Slattery. He had expected a denial, hoped that Akers would show fight. If the gambler did, Slattery was only too ready to take a hand.

The sheriff was first to recover his poise. "You admit holding up the stage?" He was watching Slim closely.

Slim smiled and nodded.

"How about the bank?"

"Sorry to disappoint you. Perhaps you'd be interested to know that I didn't shoot Rimmy."

"Never mind that."

"But I do mind that. If I didn't I wouldn't be here—and Slattery wouldn't be here. Any more questions?"

The sheriff gestured toward a doorway at the side of the gambling hall. "Is the Tonto Kid in that room?"

The banker, general manager Wentworth, and Slattery looked at one another. "The Tonto Kid?" murmured the general manager. "I thought he was in Mexico."

Slim began to whistle a little tune. The door of the bedroom opened. Framed in the doorway stood a dark haired, dark eyed young fellow smoking a cigarette. "I'm the Kid. What's the ruckus?"

The sheriff, who suspected that the new messenger was the notorious Tonto Kid was startled by his own discovery. Yet it seemed natural that the Tonto Kid should be mixed up in the stage robbery, that he had shot Rourke. He was wanted. The sheriff, however did not overlook the fact that the Kid held a strategic position. In case of gun play, he commanded the room.

"Also harboring a suspect." The sheriff turned to Slim. "Going to come along quietly?"

"Always quietly. But as for coming along. Suppose you interview some of my friends before the smoke gets too thick."

"Friends!" snorted Slattery.

"Not that kind." For the first time since their quarrel Mr. Akers' face showed a tinge of color. "Be careful, Slattery. You're walking on thin ice."

"So? And you're under it."

"Cool? Yes. You're hot. Be careful."

A MURMUR ran about the room. The Tonto Kid! Akers held up the stage! Akers and the Kid were friends!

Slim gestured. A brisk, clean-shaven young fellow rose from the poker table, was introduced as Mr. Berwick, attorney.

Slattery didn't know what was coming, but he knew it wouldn't be to his advantage. "Anybody can hire a lawyer."

"Not anybody, Mr. Slattery." The lawyer handed a folded paper to Slim. "Here's the deposition, sworn to before a notary."

Slim, in turn, handed the paper to the sheriff. "Mr. Rourke's explanation of some recent events. It's in detail. I've read it."

The sheriff read. His brows drew together. He passed the paper to the general manager. After reading Rourke's deposition, the general manager turned to Slattery. "How about this?"

Slattery didn't need to look at the paper. He knew by the sheriff's attitude that Rourke had confessed. The division manager was trapped. Murder burned in his eyes as he gazed at Slim Akers.

"Slattery," the sheriff spoke quietly, "I guess you'll have to come along too. We'll want to ask you some questions."

Slim held up his hand. "Just a minute. Mr. Berwick, would you kindly step into

my room and get a black valise you'll find on the table?"

Berwick fetched the valise. The Tonto Kid still stood in the doorway. He seemed to be smiling. Opening the black valise Slim dumped its contents onto the faro table—a stream of gold, silver and bank notes. "It totals exactly forty-five thousand, three hundred and seventy dollars—Mr. Atchison."

"Well, I'll be damned—the amount short to a dollar!"

"This valise was in Rourke's possession just before he was shot." Slim turned to the hardware merchant. "Mr. Thompson can vouch for that."

The room became silent. Men stared at one another, turned to stare at Slattery's broad white face, his burning eyes. "Look out!" cried the Tonto Kid. But Mr. Akers had been looking out. Slattery backed away and fired. The shot went high. Mr. Akers, adjusting his left cuff had fired the least fraction of a second sooner.

As the group round Slattery broke back, the Tonto Kid, for the moment forgotten, stepped out into the room. In that moment he passed Slim with a casual, "So long." He backed to the open window and stepped out. Drawing his gun the sheriff made for the window. A horse pounded down the alley in the moonlight.

"About closing me up?" Mr. Akers addressed the sheriff as he came back from the window. Mr. Akers seemed to be adjusting his left cuff. The sheriff seemed to be adjusting his mind to the sudden change in conditions. He looked at the general manager of the stage line as if asking an expression of opinion. Mr. Akers smiled. A large corporation, learning that one of its employees had been dipping into the company funds in an attempt to recover losses at a gaming table, had evoked the aid of the law. Having discovered that the Natchez played a straighter game than the employee, the law was inclined to reconsider, but needed a little moral support.

TWO of Mr. Akers' men carried Slattery downstairs. The division manager was dead before the doctor arrived. Meanwhile Sam Atchison, the sheriff, and the stage line manager drew aside for a consultation. Presently they summoned the gambler. Sam Atchison was spokesman. "Slim, I can't say that I approve of your methods. But damned if you don't get results! About closing you up. As long as I'm managing the Beardstown Miners and Traders Bank, you're free to run your business. You saved me a lot of money. You saved Wentworth, here, a lot of money. But in case you take a notion to quit, Mr. Wentworth has something to offer."

The general manager nodded. "Any time you want to take over this division, Mr. Akers, it's yours."

"Thanks. But I've lost my interest in stage lines."

"That settles it," said Wentworth. "I've got to go. Coming along, Sam?"

The Natchez bar was still open at two o'clock that morning, but the gambling hall was closed. Slim Akers entered his bedroom and turned up the light. Rimmy's sunken eyes moved, regarded Slim, closed and again came open. "You all right, Slim?"

"Never felt better."

"I heard a shot," whispered Rimmy.

"We had a little trouble this evening. But none of your friends got hurt." Taking the silver-plated derringer from his sleeve, Mr. Akers laid it on the dresser. He unbuttoned his long coat and hung it carefully on a chair back. "Doctor says you've got a chance, Rimmy. Hurry up and get well. Can't run the place without you."

Rimmy's lips twisted into a smile. The boss needed him. "I figured to do that, anyhow," he whispered. "You see, Slim, I've got to settle a little argument with Slattery and Rourke."

Mr. Akers said nothing.

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